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# 香港電影資料館

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## **Oral History**

### **Wong Kum: Movie Advertisement is Art**

Date: August 11, 2015

Interviewers: Angel Shing, May Ng

Collated by: Angel Shing

*In July of 2015, a few colleagues and I had the great honour of visiting veteran cinema billboard painter, Mr Wong Kum, at his Hillwood Road studio. Although it was our first meeting, Uncle Wong was very forthcoming with information and even agreed to be interviewed for our Oral History series at the Archive. So I swiftly prepared myself by reading up on him before sending him a draft of the interview questions. To my surprise, he took the time to provide us with written responses to all of the questions in advance. A few days after we completed the interview, he surprised me once again by faxing over a dozen pages of supplementary notes. Through these instances, one can tell how serious and supportive he is about this interview while recognising his professionalism and attention to detail. The old saying, 'success is never an accident' is especially apt when applied to this film industry veteran.*

#### **Apprenticeship**

My birth name was Wong Wan-yum. When I entered the workforce, I changed my name to 'Wong Kum' because it was easier to remember. I was born in Zhongshan in 1935. I lived with my grandmother when I was little. I studied at the village school. After school, I often visited the corner comic book stall to read comic strips. That was where my interest in illustration all started. Later on, the Japanese invaded Zhongshan. My family ended up settling in Macau where I enrolled at Colégio Diocesano de São José for primary school. When I reached grade 5, due to my family's financial situation, I had no choice but to quit school. I became an apprentice in the art department under my uncle Huang Xueshen at the Teatro Capitol for just over a year.

At the time, Teatro Capitol was a first-run theatre that screened Western films. My uncle was the art supervisor there. He had two assistants. In general, apprentices were not paid and assigned menial jobs such as cleaning canvases when the bill changed, or mixing the pigments and laying the groundwork for the master painters. At the time, we used mainly powdered pigments – a different one for each colour. We added 'peach gum' and water to produce paints. I could only practice painting at night after all the masters had left. I used flour bags as canvases. I constructed a frame from scrap wood and stretch a bag over it. Then I set about reproducing the masters' works,

or painting from films posters and stills. After I finished, I had to wash the bags.

### **The ‘Ray’ Days**

In the early fifties, when Hong Kong’s Shaw & Sons took over the Ray Theatre<sup>1</sup> in Sai Ying Pun, they invited my uncle to work for them in Hong Kong. At the time, my uncle had just landed a new stint at the Cinema Alegria and did not want to leave Macau. So he asked me, ‘Kum, do you want to give this job a try?’ It was a rare opportunity, of course I said yes. So, my uncle took me to the Shaw & Sons offices in Hong Kong, to meet with the boss, Runde Shaw. Mr Shaw instructed his eldest son to take me to the Yau Ma Tei Theatre for a trial run. Mr Shaw’s son handed me a film still of Mickey Rooney and Ava Gardner dancing together, to use as a reference, then went out for tea with my uncle. When they returned two hours later, Mr Shaw’s son examined my painting and was quite impressed. He said, ‘This is quite good!’ But when he took a closer look at me, he had second thoughts. ‘This kid is so young?’ But my uncle said, ‘Don’t worry. One of his seniors is in Hong Kong. If he doesn’t behave or something goes wrong, I’ll ask him to come and help.’ Thanks to my uncle’s reassurances, I was hired as the art supervisor for the Ray Theatre. That was how I got my first billboard painter job in Hong Kong.

The Ray Theatre was a detached building located in a good neighbourhood in Sai Ying Pun, on an incline near Third Street, close to the University of Hong Kong. The area was rich in culture. At the time, Ray was a second-run theatre. Apart from Western films, its matinee programme also featured Cantonese films. I remember that the billboards there were not very big at all. There were a few six-sheet, some three-sheet, as well as a one-sheet billboard near the production stills displayed in the entrance hall. ‘One-sheet’ refers to the size of a standard movie poster, measuring 20 by 30 inches. As a general rule for first-run theatres, billboards that were positioned over the marquees measured about 24-sheet in size. The other billboards were usually three-sheet and six-sheet in size. During my tenure as Ray’s art supervisor, the theatre would pay me a flat rate each month. It was part of the old system of contracting, so that I could hire my own assistant. At the time, the theatre only changed the bill every one or two weeks. The workload was not high. I even had spare time to visit the library in Central or to watch art films at the Star Theatre in Tsim Sha Tsui. During this period, I also started to purchase books on painting to further my studies. My work routine at the Ray Theatre continued for nearly two years before I moved over to King’s Theatre.

### **Career at ‘King’s’**

In fact, before transferring over to King’s Theatre, I worked at the Peacock

Advertising Company for a few months. Chow Fan, my assistant at the Ray, thought that it was not profitable for the two of us to be doing the same job. So he suggested to me, 'Why don't I refer you to Peacock Advertising and you can leave the job (at the Ray) entirely to me?' I didn't have any objections, so I let him have the job. Before long, the Peacock became the art contractor for King's. As a result, I became the billboard painter at King's. At the time, King's art supervisor was Lau Wing-yu. His son worked as painters with the two of us. There was also a team of assistants and apprentices.

The King's Theatre was located in the heart of Central. It was a major first-run theatre. They used waterproof paint for the billboards, a more expensive import from Germany. Unlike enamel paint that was traditionally used for wood panels, the waterproof paint was usually reserved for use on cardboard or paper. As for the 'entrance billboard', it referred to the smaller billboard below the marquee, situated next to the theatre entrance. The standard entrance billboard included the Chinese and English titles written horizontally across the centre, along with illustrations of the lead actor and actress as well as some key plot-related imagery on the two sides.

Soon after joining King's, I started to take drawing lessons from oil painter Xu Dongbai, at his studio on Wing Kut Street. I considered him my mentor – the first person who educated me about art. Later, I also studied under Headmaster Chan Hoi-ying at the Hong Kong Academy of Fine Arts, and learned oil and portrait painting from Wong Chiu-foon who had just returned from America. In the seventies, I studied under Chen Shou-soo who had just returned from Italy. Master Chen was the one who most influenced my style of portrait painting. I worked at King's for a little over a year. During this period I met Lee Man, who was an employee at the nearby Ping An Department Store. Lee also loved to paint and volunteered to help us every night. Later, he even suggested that we start a business together. So I quit my job at King's and founded the Rome Advertising Company with him. Thanks to his social networking skills, our business did quite well. Later, he decided to study abroad in Australia and we dissolved the company.

### **About 'Astor'**

In 1957, the Astor Theatre opened its doors<sup>2</sup>. I was already working with the preparations six months prior to the grand opening. From what I remember, Lee Man was also responsible for landing me this job. Because he spoke English and knew a film distributor, we were offered the opportunity to do a trial. From 1957 onwards until the theatre closed in 1987, I served as the art supervisor there. In the early days, the Astor primarily screened Western films from the Big Eight studios. This was followed by a slew of European film releases. From the late sixties up to the seventies,

the theatre screened films exclusively from the 'Chang-Feng-Sun' stable (three local production companies that included the Great Wall [pronounced as 'Chang-cheng'], Feng Huang and Sun Luen) and mainland China productions. Mainland opera troupes were also booked to perform on occasion.

Compared to other theatres at the time, I considered the Astor the best theatre in Hong Kong. It was a detached building located on Nathan Road near Yau Ma Tei, Kowloon, with easy access to public transportation. At the time, the movie billboard facing Nathan Road spanned 90 feet across by 15 feet. In general, large-scale billboards were sponsored by the film companies. Otherwise, the billboard would only be a third of the size, if the theatre was covering the costs. Creating a 90-by-15-foot painting required piecing together numerous panels, similar to installing mosaic tiles. To create a seamless image was quite a challenge. I would first draft the outline on the individual panels before painting each panel individually. I usually planned out the different colour zones in advance and pre-mixed the colours used in each zone. Since we already established the colour scheme to be used in the transition areas between the panels, there was less chance for error.

In those days, making Western film billboards was relatively easy because films from the Big Eight Studios that were released in Hong Kong always came with a standard publicity package that included a 24-sheet, a 6-sheet, a 3-sheet, a 1-sheet and a half-sheet ad, in addition to the usual set of 8 to 12 production stills. The art department simply needed to add the Chinese film title and a few taglines. By contrast, Mandarin and Cantonese films did not conform to any set standards in terms of publicity materials; they would sometimes only provide the theatre with a few taglines and a set of production stills. At most, they might suggest that you attend the preview screening. After the screening, the publicity or distribution manager would discuss the key selling points of the movie to keep in mind when designing the billboard. After the design was completed, of course we needed to submit it to the film company owner, distribution manager and publicity manager for approval. As for mainland films, the methods of promotion were quite different than Hong Kong. For the Hong Kong release, we could not use the same materials without somehow repackaging and altering the designs and the taglines. To tell the truth, in those days, whether it was the 'Chang-Feng-Sun' or the Southern Film Corporation, there was great emphasis placed on the marketing and promotion. They had higher standards and were willing to spend more money. Their main concern was first and foremost to generate publicity. The box office totals were a secondary consideration.

### **The Creative Process**

During my time at the Astor, I also founded the Evergreen Advertising Company and

accepted outside freelance work. If memory serves correct, at the time, most Cantonese film companies operated in a similar way: one purchase order would include the work for not just one theatre, but the entire movie chain. They stuck with the same contractor. That's why the designs and taglines were consistent. The only variation was the size of the billboards. As for the art department at the Astor, I was only required to perform the basic duty of painting our billboards. The majority of the Cantonese films that I worked on in those days were productions from the Kong Ngee Co., because the company's manager and movie director, Mr Chan Man, admired my work. Through his referrals, I also ended up being hired to design ads and billboards for independent productions made by Patrick Tse Yin, Chor Yuen and Patrick Lung Kong. Incidentally, our general manager, Mr Yuen Yiu-hung quit his job at the Astor to run the Ocean Theatre instead. From then on, thanks to his high regard for my work, he arranged for me to work as the art supervisor at every theatre under his management. But I wasn't given a heavy workload. I suppose in the past, bosses tended to value and take care of their trusted employees.

When I started painting movie billboards, I was also illustrating for movie posters because they essentially involved the same things. For billboards, the main consideration was the impact of the billboard from a distance. That's why the image had to be presented in a succinct style and the colours needed to be eye catching. As for film posters, due to the limited size, you couldn't introduce too much information. As the saying goes, less is more. Select a unique image or use a distinctive colour scheme. Focus on the one key message that you wish to communicate. That's all you need. The poster for *Mitra* (1977) for instance, was one of my favourite designs. The film was shot on location in Iran. That's why the poster highlighted the image of the scenic landscape, framed by an archway decorated with Islamic motifs. I also employed Iranian floral patterns in the Chinese film title, so that the text appeared to be interwoven with flowers and leaves. The lead actor and actress were a secondary consideration in terms of scale. Despite the conservative times, Lung embraced the concept, because he was also an art enthusiast. He even studied painting with me briefly, before he immigrated to America.

The billboard ad for *The Great Devotion* (1960) also left a memorable impression. I remember at the time, the Liu Chong Hing Bank in Mong Kok was still under construction. Many film companies rented advertising space there for their films. I thought, what colour scheme should I use in order to make our billboard stand out from the competition? In the end, I painted the 20 by 30 foot billboard almost entirely in black. Though the film featured many acclaimed actors, actresses and child stars, rather than use close-ups, I depicted them as a collective group, just standing there with desperate expressions on their faces. Because I wanted to convey the sense

of the poverty and desperation experienced by the dispossessed who were battered by circumstance. Fortunately, Chor accepted my design. It was a risky decision, because we were using black and white imagery for a new film. Even the names of the director and the cast were written in grey paint. A black background with grey words – it was quite dark and dreary. Most film companies would find it hard time to accept. But Mr Chor had foresight and knew it would work, so he accepted my radical design.

In the old days, film companies would normally provide me with a set of production stills. But I usually requested to see the master album. It was usually quite thick and filled with black and white production shots, including ones not selected for publicity and marketing. I would pick out the ones that I could use as reference. For example, if I had to paint actress Hsia Moon, the production still they provided might not have the right angle for what I had envisioned. That's why I would go through the album and find the photos that captured Hsia from the every angle with various expressions, and request prints. Afterwards, I would add the photos to my own archives, with a file for each actor and actress. In time, the archive that I compiled gave me a distinct advantage; it enabled me to accurately depict different actors and actresses in various guises and angles. I also continued to learn and borrow from other sources. I purchased many foreign magazines, such as *Life*, *Look*, *Post* and *Time* magazines, and kept the portrait paintings featured on the covers for reference. Since I studied painting for many years, I had a strong foundation in drawing, which only complemented my creative process.

I suppose I'm a perfectionist. From the start, I considered painting movie billboards an art form. I treasured every aspect of my work. I don't believe in just relying on talent alone; I believe in putting solid effort into completing each task. (Translated by Sandy Ng)

#### Notes

- 1 According to the 1951-02-05 edition of *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, the Ray Theatre, located on Pok Fu Lam Road and Third Street, announced that it would open on the first day of the Chinese New Year, 6 February 1951.
- 2 The Astor Theatre placed an ad in the 1957-12-23 edition of *Wah Kiu Yat Po* to announce its grand opening on 24 December 1957 and its acquisition of the first-run rights to productions from the two big studios, Warner Bros. and Rank Film Laboratories.