

Feature

Special Art Seven Colour

Wong Kee Chee

When I was a book editor, there was among my colleagues a middle aged gentleman from the mainland who, apart from being very stubborn, was talkative, and loved to whine. When he got into one of his moods, he would seize hold of you no matter how busy you were, and there was no escaping from listening to his woes.

To get rid of him and have some fun on the side, I once suggested: ‘Why don’t you go next door and ask Andrew what “Special Art Seven Colour” is? It’s quite an eye-opener, I assure you.’

Next door happened to be the English Editorial Department, staffed entirely by westerners. Among the colleagues there was a mild mannered young Englishman, who was most accommodating. Mr Whiner took the matter seriously, marched next door and demanded with his thickly accented English: ‘What is “Special Art Seven Colour”?’

Both parties ended up coming over for enlightenment: Special Art Seven Colour was the literal word for word translation of the Chinese term for Technicolor, a kind of colour film for movies. When I was little, people never say ‘colours’ when they mentioned colours, but ‘seven colour’ according to the customs of Guangzhou styled Cantonese then popularly in use. So when Technicolor was mentioned in movie ads, it became ‘Special Art Seven Colour’.

There were such a lot of fascinating names for colours then. Apart from Technicolor, there were ‘Splendid Beauty Seven Colour’ (De Luxe Colour), ‘Emerald Seven Colour’ and ‘Eastman Seven Colour’ (Eastman Colour). In local films, there was yet another interesting variety—‘Partial Seven Colour’. That was the time when film budgets were low, so when the film companies could not afford to shoot the entire film in colour, they made do with coloured segments. Even if the segment lasted less than a minute, it was a big attraction when the film was advertised in newspapers. There was a Cantonese operatic film called *The Crab Beauty’s Adventures in the Crystal Palace* (1957) back then. When advertised in the papers, the characters ‘partial Seven Colour’ were several times bigger than all the characters of the film title put together.

Films genres seemed to be much more colourful too in those days. Unlike the complexes now, which all appeared to be showing the same few films wherever one goes, movie houses then were run as circuits. Usually, one cinema on Hong Kong side and one cinema on the Kowloon side would form one circuit; when a cowboy movie was showing on one circuit, another would be showing a musical. When one circuit featured a weepie, the other one would be showing a war film. There were so many choices—horror movies, detective stories, historical

dramas, comedies, tragedies—take your pick. And if you were still not satisfied, there were always second run cinemas, matinee shows and five thirty late afternoon shows. That was a great time to become a film buff.

And life too, can be very ‘seven colour’. As the haughty film star in *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) —a very ‘seven colour’ movie—put it, films did make life much less humdrum. Even if the movie house was right next to your home, which took away some excitement of travelling to the cinema, it was a world of endless wonders once you were inside: everything dazzled as if a huge blob of colours dropped into a bland expanse of uninteresting black and white.

And there was actually a movie house called Roxy Theatre on the other side of the street from where I lived then. It was a first run theatre, showing western movies. As a kid, I loved to wander round its entrance and soon was on familiar terms with the theatre staff. I was allowed into some of its ‘secret compartments’, looking at ‘strictly confidential’ stuff. Chinese subtitles then were not printed on the film, but were projected onto a small screen beneath the big screen. The subtitles were etched onto frosted glass panes blackened with soot, and then projected, very much like a slide. The nice projectionist sat in his little room, with a small window looking down onto the screening hall. The projectionist could eat his dinner, speak to you and yet would never miss a subtitle since there was a little mirror on a pole beside the window, very much like a rearview mirror in a car. He needed only to take a glance and could immediately tell how far the story developed and which slide was to be shown. It was tremendous fun watching subtitle projection, to the extent that I saw a movie called *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* (1953) seven times, and could remember the names of the leading actors, namely Robert Wagner, Terry Moore, Gilbert Roland...

And there was this B List actor called John Derek, whose films Roxy Theatre seemed particularly fond of showing. He was a nice looking guy, but instead of Ali Baba, he called himself Haji Baba in the movies, and pranced about in big loose shiny pantaloons and shiny turbans with feathers, looking weird. But kids liked him all the same since there would always be lots of fight scenes in his movies. On top of that, all his movies were in ‘seven colour’, which made the fights all the more spectacular.

It always was a wondrous sight when the movies began. Movie houses then were like theatres, with heavy, brownish red velvet curtains on the stage. When the movie images appeared, the curtains would become transparent. At the same time, the lights would dim and the velvet curtains parted, revealing the gossamer like white curtains beneath, which also turned transparent. These white curtains would also part and then, crisp and clear, the movie images took on the life of their own. First came the commercials, then the trailers, then the newsreels, sometimes also shorts and cartoons, until finally, the main feature. As soon as the curtains turned transparent, everything became magical, even the black and white newsreels, since

there would also be tanks and airplanes. But newsreels could also be stupid and downright boring, such as those produced by an agency with the same flying kangaroo logo as Qantas, which always began solemnly with strains of the 'New World Symphony' and consisted of nothing but horse or car races.

But movies would always be fun; the trouble was, you could not go to see a movie everyday. To solve the problem, I cut a square shaped hole on a piece of cardboard, and painted the frame black, turning it into a screen. Everything would turn into movies if you look at them through this frame. So if Mom or the amah approached the frame, it would always be medium wide shots becoming close ups. If you looked outside the window with this frame, moving it from left to right or right to left, you got the pan shot. And if you were imaginative enough, you could see your favourite movies: *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), *Shane* (1953) or whatever, as many times as you wanted.

Watch movies often enough, and the stars would come down from the screen and walked into your life. I was racing down a corridor in Repulse Bay Hotel once, and wham! bumped into a European woman in minks. The face that smiled down on me looked familiar: it was Ava Gardner, I was told, who came to Hong Kong to promote her latest film, *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954). It just happened that the movie premiered at the Roxy Theatre!

However, I never did like Mandarin movies! Dad and Mom used to take me to see just western movies, but, for some strange reasons, Mom suddenly decided that she liked Li Lihua, who was supposed to be classy and elegant. Mandarin movies always looked a bit weird to me; firstly, they were never in 'seven colour', and the actors all behaved in some funny ways, speaking with odd voices. The one Mom took me to see was particularly awful: Li Lihua barely finished saying her lines before she promptly sat herself by the side of a swimming pool, and started singing, kicking the water with her feet as she sang. I raised hell!

Going to movies with Mom could be scary, since she just wanted to see the same two movies —*Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Waterloo Bridge* (1940)—over and over again. But there were exceptions: once, surprisingly, she took me to see the film version of Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951). I could remember little of the movie, except that it began with an arrow striking right on target. It was only recently that I found out the film was a British one, produced and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. These two gentlemen were pioneers in Technicolor movie making; their films were brilliantly coloured but were never garish. As a kid, I was probably mesmerised by their fantastic use of colours, that I was lost in the magical world of tints and hues.

After we moved twice, movies became gradually more distanced. This was especially so when we moved for the second time. Our new home was on the edge of the city, almost like the countryside in those days, with not one movie house in sight.

And they began to print the subtitles onto the films; the small screen beneath the big screen had all but disappeared. And 'coloured' was the more popular term than 'seven colour'. The strange thing was, once people started saying 'coloured', movies became much less exciting.

Roxy Theatre began showing Mandarin movies, but returned to showing first run western movies a short while later. Since then, the films I saw there left no lasting impressions, except three: Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* (1958), *Zorba the Greek* (1964) starring Anthony Quinn, and Visconti's great *Il Gattopardo* (1963).

In these days when there are lots of special effects but very little special art, and coloured films are taken for granted, it is funny that a small prank remembered could bring out such a lot of memories. I seemed to be seeing the letters 'The End' appearing on the screen, the transparent curtains began to draw, the British national anthem was playing, the Queen appeared riding on her horse. The lights came on, the velvet curtains were no longer transparent, and the British anthem was replaced by the grand 'Under the Double Eagle', an American march.

It was in this same movie house that I saw a musical short, a kind of MTV of the 1950s, of the song 'April in Portugal' sung in the original Portuguese. On the screen was a dark haired woman with bright red lips, wearing a white blouse and floral patterned skirt. She stood under a bright violet blue sky, in front of a bougainvillea shrub with brilliant scarlet bract, singing happily:

Coimbra do Choupal
Ainda es capital
Do amor em Portugal...

Very 'seven colour', and very special.

Wong Kee-chee, artist, translator, writer and host of the RTHK Putonghua Channel programme 'The Enchanted Melodies of Western Classics'. He used to work as lecturer in the School of Communication of the Hong Kong Baptist University and as producer/director for local television stations. His publications include Mei Shao Yue (Moon over the Plum Groves, 1982) and The Age of Shanghainese Pops 1930-1970 (2000).

Seminar

Pearl River Delta: Popular Culture & Film



(From right) Law Kar, Ng Ho, Bede Cheng and Ou Ning.

The Hong Kong Film Archive held a seminar on ‘Pearl River Delta: Popular Culture & Film’ at the archive on 16 April 2005, to complement its special programme, ‘Pearl River Delta: Movie, Culture, Life’. The speakers were Law Kar, HKFA Programmer, Ng Ho, Associate Professor in the Department of Cinema and Television, Hong Kong Baptist University, and Ou Ning, Guangzhou critic. They explored the symbiotic relationship between Guangzhou and Hong Kong in theatre, cinema and popular culture from the early days to China’s implementation of the Open Door and Reform Policy.

Law Kar began by analysing theatrical and cinematic exchange between Hong Kong and Guangzhou from the early 20th century to just before the Sino-Japanese War. Prior to the 1950s there was little mention of Hong Kong cinema. It was subsumed under the umbrella of South China cinema as most Hong Kong people had a sense of belonging to China and Chinese culture. In 1905, modern drama—a type of modified, Western-influenced drama—appeared in China, and three years later, it arrived in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Its key advocates included Chan Siu-pak and Leung Siu-po, who founded theatre companies such as the Qingping Theatre Troupe and gave frequent performances in Guangzhou, Hong Kong and South Asia. There were also the Zhishiban—popular in the 1910s and 1920s—whose performances fell between modern drama and Cantonese opera. Their modified Cantonese opera was performed in modern costumes and encompassed singing, acting and dialogue. They made use of new stories to critique society, becoming the mainstream dramatic form.

Between 1927 and 1929, theatre and cinema were passionately embraced by forward-thinking youth in Guangzhou. In 1929 Ouyang Yuqian founded the Guangdong Institute of Theatre Research. Under its wings was the Guangzhou Academy of Drama from which Hong Kong

inherited drama. In 1932, Kwong Shan-siu, Lee Fa, and Yam Wu-fa and some others tried their hand at filmmaking. Lee Fa shot *Artillery Assault on Five Finger Mountain* in 1935, a talkie starring Lo Dun and Lee Lai-lin. After 1933, these young people came to Hong Kong.

Sun Yat-sen's nationalist revolution was based in Guangzhou. In the 1920s, the appeal of revolution drew idealistic youth to Guangzhou where they ran newspaper and became involved in film and drama. In the early 1930s, Guangzhou led the development of cinema. However growing political instability soon undermined its role as a cultural hub. By contrast, Hong Kong, being conveniently located and a free port where businessmen and foreign-educated individuals assembled, was an ideal cultural heir. In 1925, nationalistic sentiments reignited by the Great Hong Kong-Guangdong Strike drove many Hong Kong people to Guangzhou. This led to the merging of the cultures and cinematic activities of the two neighbours. Sound cinema began developing after 1933 and both cities made Cantonese talkies. As the films were shot in Cantonese and featured famous Cantonese opera artists such as Sit Kok-sin, Ma Si-tsang, Pak Kui-wing, and Tam Lan-hing, they had markets as far as South Asia. This expanded their audience base, making them worthy competitors of the Shanghainese products. Hong Kong's film industry soon gained an edge due to its status as a tax-free port and superior conditions for printing and developing. On the other hand, production in Guangzhou was plagued by frequent electricity outage. The city's chaotic political scene also drove potential investors and technical experts to its safer neighbour. After 1934, Hong Kong gradually became the centre of South China cinema.

In conclusion, Law Kar is of the view that cinematic and theatrical exchange between Hong Kong and Guangzhou began around 1911 and that the Great Hong Kong-Guangzhou Strike in 1925 and the nation-wide anti-Japanese war effort in 1937 both served to bridge the distance between the two cities.

Ng Ho believes that pre-war popular culture in Hong Kong and Guangzhou falls into three categories: publishing (including newspaper and novels), drama (mainly Cantonese opera), and cinema. Among them publishing was the most important. In remote, poverty-stricken areas, cinemas and even shed theatres were hard to come by, so publishing culture easily became the most popular.

In former times, Guangzhou was 'the provincial city' whereas Hong Kong was simply called 'Hong Kong land'. Originally a wasteland, Hong Kong gained prosperity only after the fall of Shanghai and Guangzhou and the ensuing influx of people and capital. Back then there were three types of writing in Guangzhou and Hong Kong—classical, vernacular and Cantonese (or four with the addition of Cantonese English). They were a sample of folk culture of course, but they were also a resisting force against the official culture which advocated Mandarin and linguistic standardisation. The unofficial newspapers at the time differentiated between

newspaper, which was penned in vernacular prose, and tabloid, which was written in Cantonese. For example, tabloids like *Guangzhou Minbao* specialised in airing dirty laundry as well as serial novels, satirical essays, leisure and entertainment, and sentimental rantings. During the separatist warlord regime in the 1930s, those disgruntled with the political tug-of-war used the tabloids to attack the warlords. The warlords took revenge, causing some publishers to take their business to Hong Kong. Viewpoints that were not tolerated in Guangzhou now appeared in Hong Kong's columns, fueling the development of the tabloid industry. This was also how Hong Kong inherited the tabloid tradition of standing up against official culture.

Two of the most famous tabloids were Yam Wu-fa's *Pioneer* and *Hung Look Po*. Yam also penned the serial *Man Killer of China* and *Hot-tempered Leung* under the pseudonym 'Chow Pak-ping'. *Man Killer of China*, which came out even before *James Bond*, is arguably the earliest thriller novel. *Tien Kwong Morning News* was also famous for its serials. Its star-novelists were Mong Wan, Kit Hak and Ping Ho. Mong Wan was the editor of the post-war entertainment paper *Floodlight* and author of *The Black Knight*, a story about a mysterious character in Shanghai, a burglar by night who fell in love with the country's top female secret agent. In 1941, it was adapted into a movie by the same name starring Ng Cho-fan as the lead. Kit Hak's *The Red Scarf* was the first Hong Kong novel to have been adapted for cinema while *Far Away* was Ping Ho's best known novel.

Cartoons were also a favourite of Hong Kong's newspapers. Their satirical content went down well with the ordinary folks. In the 1930s, many celebrated cartoonists, such as Li Fan-fu and Chan Tse-do, were already strutting their wares in Hong Kong's newspapers. Among them, Ng Fa-pang's *King of Blunders*, carried in post-war tabloid *Lance Daily*, was extremely popular for its mocking of corrupt officials and the collusion between business and government.

Broadcast culture also took shape after the war. Over 10 radio stations were opened in Guangzhou with equipment left behind by the Japanese and the Americans. The most celebrated figure must have been Li Ngaw whose airwave-novels were all the rage. Li's tales ditched ancient stories for the tales of post-war happenings. His *Crime Doesn't Pay* kept Guangzhou and Hong Kong listeners glued to their radios for eight months straight. It was later published as a novel which, according to Li, sold over a million copies.

Ou Ning briefly described the indie scene in Guangdong since post-1949, using the productions of Pearl River Film Studio as a starting point. From an industry viewpoint, Guangdong cinema refers to the works of studios in Guangdong or those made in Guangdong with Guangdong capital. From an aesthetic viewpoint, it refers to movies that reflect the history and realities of Guangdong.

In 1949, the central government decentralised film studios with the aim of having one in each province. Wong Wai-yat was ordered to set up Pearl River Film Studio in Guangzhou. It shortly ceased operations, resuming only in 1956. Subsequently it made *Secret Guards in Canton* (1957) and *The Demise of Spies* (1963). In 1962, Choi Cho-sang and Wong Wai-yat shot *Waves of the Southern Seas*, a film about revolution in the fishing villages of the Pearl River estuary. Despite its strong political message, the film is very human—an indication of sophisticated artistry. *Seventy-two Tenants* (1963), directed by Wong, is rich in local colour. Filmed in Cantonese and played by veterans of Cantonese opera, it paints a convincing picture of the mundane in Guangdong culture.

In the 1980s, Pearl River made quite a few social realist films. Among them, *Escape to Hong Kong* (1981), directed by Zhang Liang, scrutinises the Guangzhou-Hong Kong relationship in the early days of the Open Door Policy by citing the fates of Shenzhen peasants who have entered Hong Kong illegally. His two other titles are *Yamaha Fish Stall* (1984) and *Working Girls in the Sez* (1990). The former tells the tale of private small business owners against a backdrop of Guangzhou's cityscape. The latter seeks to reproduce the texture of real life through its oblique portrayal of country girls working in the city as the victims of China's modernisation. Zhang Zeming's *Swan Song* (1985) contains details unique to Guangdong cinema that differentiate it from the Fifth Generation aesthetics of the North.

In the area of independent video production, Ou Ning quoted *Imbalance 257* (1999), '257' being the street number of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. The film depicts the ennui of today's tertiary students in a style reminiscent of Wong Kar-wai. *The Only Son* (2002), Guangdong's first independent feature, examines Protestantism in rural areas, while the subject of the second indie feature *Stranger's Street* (2003) is the influx of peasant workers into Guangzhou. *San Yuan Li* (2003) is an experimental documentary in which agitated music and white-knuckle editing highlight the contrast between town and country, new and old communities. Another documentary *Houjie* (2003) takes an incisive look at peasant worker dormitories on Dongguan's Houjie. It also contains vivid scenes of workers being beaten up by the police. Town-country dynamics and the problems resulting from rapid economic and social growth are the theme of most of the indie works mentioned above. Mainland Chinese law only allows films to be shot in putonghua but independent filmmakers have consciously adopted Cantonese as their cinematic language of choice.

The three speakers discussed the intimate connections between Hong Kong and Guangzhou's popular culture since the early 20th century. Guangzhou's revolutionary tradition had evolved into a custom of popular resistance, which had been passed on to Hong Kong where it took root in local soil and flourished into a unique culture. (Collated by Edith Chiu; translated by Piera Chen)

Event

Visit by the members of the Hong Kong Performing Artistes Guild

The members of the Hong Kong Performing Artistes Guild paid a visit to the Archive on 18 May. Bobby Yip, Lana Wong, Lam Kau (photo above: front row, 2nd right; second row, 6th and 7th right), Ricky Wong (photo below: front row, 4th left) were among some forty members of the Guild, who enjoyed themselves much at the guided tour of our exhibition, Cinema, Resource Centre and the Film-related Materials Store. While reminiscing the old movies and relics, they were enthusiastic to pose for the Archive as a token of their visit.



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