

## Seminar

### When Race Met Gender: The Career of Anna May Wong



(From left) Bede Cheng, Elaine Mae Woo, Ed Manwell, Angela Tong, Law Kar and Sam Ho

Anna May Wong has a unique place in film history as the first Chinese-American to pursue a movie career in Hollywood or even the world. HKFA held a seminar at the theatre on 19th November 2005 to take a more in-depth look at her life and career. Hosted by Sam Ho, programmer, the seminar featured invited speakers including Law Kar, film scholar, and Elaine Mae Woo and Ed Manwell from the US, respectively director and producer of a documentary on Anna May Wong, who discussed Wong's life, career and the challenges she encountered as an Asian woman while pursuing a movie career in the US, Europe and China.

Ed Manwell began by giving an account of the background to Wong's career. Wong had made up her mind at a young age to become a movie actress; yet Asian families back then saw actresses as prostitutes and American society discriminated against Asian communities. During the depression-wrecked 1870s, Chinese immigrants flocked to the US to work in coal mines and railroads. The Americans, blaming the economic depression on the Chinese, came down hard on them, and rioters added to the plight of the Chinese. New legislation was passed prohibiting interracial marriages. This evolved into the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which barred Chinese labourers from entering the US. It was against this backdrop of discrimination and exclusion that Anna May Wong was born and raised. Although she was in every sense an American according to the constitution, she was regarded as an alien for the most part of her artistic life. Asian women were perfunctorily portrayed as evil and submissive or victimised, as seen for example, by her role as the young Chinese girl who dies for love in *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) and the evil female in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931). Yet in *Shanghai Express* (1932), she outshone Marlene Dietrich—her talent unmistakable in her consummate use of body, eyes and voice.

Law Kar pointed out that Anna May Wong, who belonged to the second generation of Chinese-Americans, showed, at 17, obvious potential in her performance in *The Toll of the*

*Sea*. Later she partnered with Douglas Fairbanks in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) as a Mongol slave. Although the film's theme was disrespectful to the Chinese, her image stood out. And as the film was distributed worldwide, she became an international star.

During the Japanese invasion in the 1930s, nationalism was riding high in China. The country became highly sensitised to Western behaviour that might constitute an insult to the Chinese people. Wong's image naturally did not go down well; she was criticised as unloving of herself and pretending to be Western. Nonetheless the audience loved her. Newspapers and magazines in the 1920s and 30s used her many screen images to attract readers. For instance, her Chinese character shot graced the cover of the 1920s magazine *Yingxishijie*.

In her early Hollywood days, Anna May Wong played many stereotypical and derogatory roles without realising their negative impact on her career. She only began choosing scripts after 30. In 1927 and 1928, she took her career to Europe where, thanks to her poise and elegance, intellectuals and film masters romanticised her as the offspring of the marriage of Eastern and Western beauty. Her competence as an actress was also recognised.

In 1934, Wong's father returned to Taishan, China. Two years later, she went to visit him. She took lessons in Chinese language and culture, and spent half a year in Beijing learning Peking opera from Mei Lanfang. There were articles introducing her in the Chinese media but the press dismissed her as arrogant and ignorant of Chinese culture. Nonetheless she was an expert at styling her own image. She designed her own Chinese dresses and her character shots exuded sophistication. She won the hearts of the audience, especially the Shanghainese. Some intellectuals identified with her image and life philosophy while others put her down as an insult to the nation.

Elaine Mae Woo is a fourth generation American-born Taishanese who has given a lot of thought to the state of Chinese-Americans. Anna May Wong and the Chinese of that generation have been models for her life so she spent eight painstaking years researching for a documentary that scrutinises the legendary Wong. Wong was a multi-talented actress who had played her share of negative, stock roles in the US and who was not particularly conscious of the status of Chinese-American women. *Song* (1928), however, witnessed her breaking the chains of derisive stereotypes to become a brilliant actress in her own right. In the 1930s she took active part in charity shows to raise funds for the Chinese anti-war effort. From 1930 to late 1940, she was a radio host. In 1951, she starred in *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*, becoming the first Asian woman to play the lead in an American serial drama. Although there are quite a few Asia-American actors in large American mainstream productions, there could never be another Anna May Wong legend. (Collated by Edith Chiu; translated by Piera Chen)

## Seminar

### Open Talk—An Evening with Jeff Lau



To enhance communication with the local film community, the Hong Kong Film Archive staged an open talk titled *An Evening with Jeff Lau* on 3 December 2005 at the Archive Cinema. A chance to meet with this auteur director, known for being media shy, was a long-awaited rarity for both the press and film lovers.

Thomas Shin, noted film critic and host of the talk, began by pointing out the close connections between Lau's creative style and the work of HKFA. Started off as a screenwriter, Lau soon diversified his role as director, producer and actor playing cameo parts. Having over 30 directorial works under his belt, the 'ghost' series in his early years based its premise on Cantonese films in the black-and-white era. Vestiges of Cantonese classics were equally evident in the music arrangement for *92 Legendary la rose noire* (1992). Devoted to the preservation of local film heritage and the combing of film history, HKFA has been striving in a way closely related to Lau's artistic pursuit.

Lau kept on saying that there is no such thing as 'invention' in this world but mere 'discovery'. While his works may come up in varying faces, Lau stressed that the elements within are all ready-made, and what he does is nothing but putting them together in one way or another. Such can be seen in his constant attempts in cross-over, crafting classical literature, martial arts novels and comics into one. A hotchpotch as his works may seem, the need to maintain balance in the process of collage always stands uppermost in his mind. Also, mesmerised by Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), Lau veered onto filming tragedy in a comic approach since 1995. The effort to make this happen doubles and so does the satisfaction it brings. His many tragic-comedies, *Timeless Romance* (1998; as screenwriter), *A Chinese Odyssey* (Parts One and Two, 1995), *Thunder Cops II* (1989), *Out of the Dark* (1995), to name a few, each stands out in its own right and makes a special mark in his varied oeuvre.



Jeff Lau (left) and Thomas Shin

Thomas Shin then moved on to analyse the director's creative style with reference to his works. The first element constantly in force is 'displacement of sexual identity', in namely *Fong Sai-yuk* (scripted by Lau in 1993), *Timeless Romance* and *Chinese Odyssey 2002* (2002). Hugely inspired by Jin Yong novels, Lau stated that hidden strokes on homosexuality are not rarely seen in the originals, rendering his screen adaptation nothing new. When it comes to a creative director as Lau, social conventions are never to be taken as constraints.

The host then introduced another common feature in Lau's works—time-crossing—which is brought into full play in *A Chinese Odyssey* (Parts One and Two). Approaching his forties while making this film, Lau attributed his soft spot to the middle-age crisis—a time machine was badly wanted so that he could travel to the past to make it a better life. On the contrary, Lau saw himself as a child when producing his latest hit *A Chinese Tall Story* (2005), simply allowing his imagination to run riot in an innocent world. A devout Catholic, Lau finds himself greatly attracted to the all-encompassing vastness of the Buddhist teachings. Going ahead with his 'discoveries' in this world continues to bring him endless joy and, in addition, inspirations to his art.

Among the audience were mostly young people and secondary school students who were quick to raise challenging questions against the director. Though rendering witty answers in a relaxed manner, even a quick-thinker as Lau could not hide his surprise.

(Collated by Elbe Lau)

## Seminar

### Poetic Surrealism of Cocteau Cinema



( From left ) William Cheung, Yankwai Wong, Julian Lee and Yuri Ng

Jean Cocteau was known as a multi-talented director, poet, painter, playwright, and fashion and stage designer. A shortcut to the spellbinding world of this French artist is through his films which are surreal in terms of both subject matter and style. To accompany the 'Inspired by Jean Cocteau' exhibition, a seminar on 'Poetic Surrealism of Cocteau Cinema' was held at the HKFA on 14th January. It was hosted by Julian Lee, curator, and featured William Cheung as speaker, and participating artists Yankwai Wong and choreographer Yuri Ng as guests in response.

Julian Lee confessed that he became permanently hooked on Cocteau ever since he watched *Orpheus* (1949) in university. Plans for this exhibition began after he returned from the Jean Cocteau retrospective held on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Cocteau's death at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2003. Preparations took over a year and 10 artists were invited to create works using different art forms including poetry, song, painting, dance, sculpture, photography, comics, fashion, mixed media, and gourmet cooking.

William Cheung unravelled Cocteau through his writings, line drawings and films. This genius had begun publishing his own poetry out of his own pocket as a teenager. All his life, he was a self-professed poet and his films exuded mythical poetry. Cocteau liked the company of artists. His cross-media capabilities were nurtured in the artistic atmosphere of Paris of the 1920s and 30s when different artists influenced each other. In his early days, he was influenced by *Rite of Spring* composer Stravinsky, and Picasso who painted the backdrop for the ballet *Parade* (on display in IFC, Central in 2005). The play he wrote had avant-garde features such as improvisation, extended monologues and a focus shift away from the plot. His other scripts also provided inspiration for many directors such as French New Wave director Melville and Spaniard Almodovar.

William Cheung showed several of Cocteau's line drawings. The artist once said of his fixation on lines that 'line is life' and that it is not him who draws the line but the line which makes him create. He was equally obsessed with the drawing hand because it is engaged in creating and it is creating which brings about surreality. Cheung also pointed out other connotations of the hand—narcissism and desire. The hand's caress of body and face in *Blood of Poet* and *The Testament of Orpheus* (1959) expresses narcissism and the desire to possess the body. In *Orpheus*, the hand is the magical weapon that transcends life and death, dream and reality. Other frequently appearing images in Cocteau's films include faces and masks. Cheung believes that the more faces appear in films, the less they are likely to be the director's; the more he wishes to show, the more he is hiding. In Cocteau, masks are often used to represent emotional experience, real or otherwise, while fiction is depicted by reality—viewers and director are engaged in dream creation in a kind of ideal surreality.

Painter Yankwai Wong and choreographer Yuri Ng joined the speakers in discussing their works and the process of creation. Ng admitted that his knowledge of Cocteau came more from his writings and drawings than from his films. He is interested in seeing how Cocteau, if he were alive, would make use of present technology and filming techniques, since traditional theatrical techniques, compared to their contemporary equivalents, are more human and creative. Ng's work for the exhibition is extempore, featuring the improvisation of dancer Nishijima Kazuhiro at his most tranquil and natural—footage that was subsequently edited by Ng. Despite the absence of a storyline and of any deliberate juxtaposition of face, hands, water, and mirror, the arrangement was the most beautiful and coincided with Cocteau's recurring motifs.

Yankwai Wong's painting was inspired by two self-portraits: a narcissistic one of Cocteau taken when he was around 20, showing a delicate and sensitive young man at his most beautiful; and one of a female friend taken before a photo showing the profile of a 40-year-old Cocteau. Both give the impression of the passage of time which must have been the thing Cocteau most despised. Wong's painting was born from this perspective—in the plain, muted tones of afternoon light, Cocteau sits in front of a mirror, his face blurred as if the harder he tries to find his own face, the more faceless he becomes. Cocteau once remarked that 'life is a horizontal fall'. This is a very literary way of putting a kind of thinking that had infused every single one of his films. And it is this horizontal fall that Wong wanted to bring out. (Collated by Wong Ching; translated by Piera Chen)

**Donors (11.2005-1.2006)**

Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd

Emperor Motion Pictures

Film Workshop Co Ltd

Golden Harvest (HK) Ltd

Hong Kong Film Arts Association

JCE Movies Ltd

Shaws Brothers (Hong Kong) Limited

Ms Kennis Chan

Ms Cheng Chu

Mr Chou Kam-lun

Mr Chu Sui-tong

Mr Paul Fonoroff

Mr Ho Kian-ngiap

Mr Jeffery Hui

Mr David Lam

Mr Lau Ka-ho

Mr Lau Shing-hon

Mr Lee Kam-wah

Mr Julian Lee

Ms LiYizhuang

Mr Lo Chi-keung

Ms Luk Lei

Ms Dorothy Sam

Mr Johnny Wang

Mr Jorgen Wedseltoft

Mr Wong Kee-chee

Mr James Wong

Ms Natalie Wong

Mr Yiu Chung-tung

Ms Yu So-chau