

From Monochrome to Colour—Interview with Kwan Lei-po

By May Ng

Kwan Lei-po (1933-deceased date unknown) started his career in black-and-white printing and processing in 1950, working for Dachangcheng Laboratory and Sing Kwong Co. In the mid-60s, he took up a post in colour processing at the Universal Laboratory Ltd. In 1967, he reverted to black-and-white processing at Kin Shing Studio but in just over a year, the demise of monochrome pictures led him to change jobs as a film editor, mainly specialising in Thai and Indonesian films which were developed in Hong Kong. He then worked for Union Film Lab Ltd. and retired in 1994.

In 1999, Mr Kwan was interviewed for the Hong Kong Film Archive Oral History Project. He gave us a fascinating overview of the history of Hong Kong's motion picture film printing and processing industry. The following excerpt refers to the section on black-and-white processing.

Manual Operation

In the early 50s, many companies had yet to invest in mechanical technology, and continued to process film manually. They wound the film round and round a 'board', pinned down the head and the tail and immersed the film into a square wooden barrel filled with chemicals for development. One board could hold about 100 to 200 ft long, and each time, up to five or six boards could be processed, enabling 1,000 ft of film to be developed. When developing negatives, immersion for 10 minutes would suffice. During the process, the technician had to continuously agitate the barrel by hand to prevent the colours from being uneven. After the image had materialised, the film would be put in sodium thiosulfate for fixing, removing the undeveloped silver and washed in water.

Nitrate Film

Although safety film was already in existence, inflammable nitrate film was still in use. He recalled how his elderly mentors always reminded him to be careful when handling nitrate film, such as being sure to turn off the lamp under the winding table before leaving to prevent the film from catching fire or getting burnt.

Print Inspection

When a film printer was used to process negatives, the first step in the process was to inspect the film. The technicians would wind the negative and check the film edge by hand to make sure there were no edge or perforation damages. Then they would affix adhesive tape onto the perforation of the negative, to prevent it from being torn apart during machine processing.

Negative Development

During print processing, the technicians would start by developing the sample film that the cameraman had shot for trial purposes. They would try out the usual print development time settings for different types of negatives, and let the film grader to check for under or over exposure, before determining the optimal time for the real negative.

If the trial film was not available, the technicians would hold a green light torch against the machine to check how well the images had been developed, and adjust the development time accordingly. After the images had emerged, they were immersed in sodium thiosulfate for fixing, afterwards they were inspected under a red light. The technician also had to control the temperature of the chemicals, in case it got too hot. This could be done by adjusting the machine settings. However, when the print was submerged in processing tank, the temperature had to be kept low manually. When the climate got very hot, the companies had to buy ice cubes and pour them into the tank every three or four hours.

Editing

When the negative and the sound track were ready, they would be handed over to the editor. In those days, when equipment for direct viewing of the film was not available, they had to view it under magnifying glass. After the film had been edited, the answer print would be made and they would further edit the film.

Darkroom Techniques

If fade-in, fade-out or other special effects were required, the images on film had to be bleached by manually rinsing it in 'red salt'. The same goes for dissolves, two segments of film were overlapped with each other during printing. As for once popular martial arts special effects like flying daggers and a gust of wind emanating from the hero's fists, they were hand-painted frame by frame. The props master Lo Ki-ping, for example, was an excellent hand-painter of special effects.

Kwan Kwan-chun Print Development Machine Assembly

Kwan Lei-po's uncle Kwan Kwan-chun also worked at Sing Kwong Co. In his days, the machine they had took 25 minutes to half an hour to process a 1,000 ft reel. It took four to five hours to complete the processing of a 10,000 ft print. Eventually, Kwan Kwan-chun managed to assemble another machine that could accelerate the processing of a 1,000 ft reel in 10 to 15 minutes. It took only four minutes for the images to develop. The new apparatus was used to process film prints, positives, soundtrack, and subtitles, while the original machine was used for processing negatives. During the heyday of Cantonese cinema, especially around Chinese New Year, the printing machines often operated 24/7, and brought considerable profit to this business. (Translated by Maggie Lee)

May Ng has been assistant director and film producer. She is now editor of 'New Vision Arts Festival'.

Seminar

From Cheung Wood-yau to Stephen Chow: The Film Career of Chor Yuen



Sam Ho (Left) and Grace Ng

Director Chor Yuen was one of the representative figures of 1950s to 1990s Hong Kong cinema. Having blazed many trails, he occupies an irreplaceable position in the history of the silver screen. Besides screening selections of his work, the HKFA held a seminar on 4th February 2006 in which Programmer Sam Ho (Ho) and film critic Grace Ng (Ng) engaged in dialogue analysing Chor Yuen's cinema.

Ho: Chor Yuen has a unique style. This can be readily seen in the flamboyant openings of his early films. *A Mad Woman* (1964), for example, captures attention by opening with a totally dark screen, later adding only the voice of the narrator.

Ng: This is very stylised, reminiscent of the stage and the storytelling traditions; but it's also very modern.

Ho: Chor Yuen's works are simultaneously realistic and stylised. They exude an expressionist flair.

Ng: This is the duality that characterizes his films—he is influenced by filmic conventions yet makes stylistic endeavours with youthful sentimentality. His topics are neither old nor new; he is a transitory figure between tradition and modernity.

Ho: There is a rebelliousness against the father generation which, a little like James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), a rather universal sentiment. This rebelliousness was clearly influenced by European cinema and Hollywood films. In *The Great Devotion*

(1960), he himself plays an alienated young man. The role's minimal dialogue and exaggerated body language were clearly a nod to the Western tradition.

Part I of *Eternal Regret* (Parts One and Two, 1962) is about an established family of pre-war China, with a theme typical of the films of Union Film Enterprise; yet the execution is quite modern.

Ng: *Eternal Regret* is undoubtedly a story about the values of a traditional family of the last generation and the vicissitudes it suffered during the war; it deals with youthful rebellion and the pursuit of freedom of marriage. If the film had taken the path of popular drama, Keung Chung-ping's role would have been a conniving traitor; but in fact, he is a righteous figure.

Ho: The film also takes an exotic look at traditions by showing the rituals of concubine taking in detail—like a National Geographic documentary, in stark contrast to United films like *Family* (1953), *Spring* (1953) and *Autumn* (1954).

Ng: Chor Yuen takes a modern and critical look at the concubinage tradition. There is much irony in Cheung Wood-yau's role; in the Part I, he stands up against the feudal system but in Part II, he is the supreme manipulator of power and resources.

Ho: Cheung Wood-yau is an idealistic young man in Part I, a character straight out of *Family*, *Spring* and *Autumn*. In Part II, his raging anger when meeting Pak Yin again and his hatred of the twins complete the cycle of rebellion against the patriarchy and his subsequent control of the power dynamics.

Another of Chor's directorial attempts *The Prodigal* (1969) starts off with slow jazz rhythms to highlight Patrick Tse Yin's mood. The film's documentary-like portrayal of industrial construction sites in Tsimshatsui and Central merges the character's emotional state with the social environment.

Ng: *The Prodigal's* atmosphere of alienation and solitude and its depiction of granite hills seem influenced by Italian director Antonioni.

Ho: The film's ending also seems inspired by Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966).

Ng: It's one man against society. But it is doubtful whether the incident actually happened and Chor Yuen's melancholy comes through. His sadness is also expressed by his favourite visual themes: setting sun, autumn leaves, withered leaves.

Black Rose (1965) opens with a fancy dress party in which Chor Yuen's treatment of identity shifts and ambiguity is highly entertaining. *Spy with My Face* (1966), on the other hand, is an imitation of James Bond movies, while in *To Rose with Love* (1967), the line between bandit and warrior is blurred. Perhaps identity is determined by appearance, like in Chor Yuen's filmic adaptations of Gu Long's novels. It really is impossible to know who is the villain and who is the hero.

Ho: In *Black Rose*, Nam Hung forgoes her faithful housewife persona and plays a new kind of Hong Kong woman. She is not only a society woman who lives on rich men but also Black Rose, lady Robin Hood. The ambiguity of her character echoes the increasing complexity of Hong Kong society.

Ng: Identity is a floating commodity in the modern world, unlike the stable value systems of our father's generation.

Ho: All three stories of the *Black Rose* series are transitory. *Black Rose* tells a Robin Hoodesque tale of stealing from the rich to help the poor. *Spy with My Face* is a James Bond imitation, made in expensive colour, with spy-film music and fancy gadgets, the film represents a new direction for Cantonese cinema that favours the visceral and the spectacular. *To Rose with Love* signifies yet another departure from *Spy with My Face* with characters outwitting each other and blurring lines between fiction and reality—in short, it's very Gu Long. Chor Yuen said that he has never read Gu Long's novels yet the style that later become identified with Gu Long adaptations can be found in his first *wuxia* film *Cold Blade* (1970) and, even earlier, *To Rose with Love*. When Chor Yuen adaptations of Gu Long novels are so good because both are good at portraying modern sensibilities through the ancient *wuxia* world.

Ng: *The Diary of a Husband* (1964) is also a story about contemporary urbanites. Its protagonists are a young married couple; the husband wants to fool around but is scared of being caught and reluctant to confront the problem. The films of Chun Kim, who is half a generation older than Chor, believed in romance: the man would exhaust all means to win the heart of his love. Chor Yuen, by contrast, pens the conflicts and tension between the two genders from a modern perspective: how the husband tries to cheat on the wife and how the modern tigress teaches him a lesson.

Ho: The men no longer abide by traditional codes of chivalry, a sign of the changing times. The film doesn't resort to a simplistic moral dichotomy, with the boundary between good and bad becoming ambiguous.

In the much later *Sleazy Dizzy* (1990), Chor Yuen teams up with Stephen Chow. The film is sprinkled with *mo lay tau* moments and the relationship between Chow and Chan Koon-tai is also reminiscent of Chun Kim's *My Intimate Partners* (1960).

(Collated by Edith Chiu; translated by Piera Chen)

Seminar

The Legacy of Humanism: Ba Jin and Film



(From left) Wong Ain-ling, Dr Ding Yaping and Sam Ho

In October, 2005, China's revered novelist Ba Jin passed away, at the age of 101. The profound humanism of his works was deeply cherished by socially conscious Hong Kong film professionals of the 1950s and 60s. His novels were frequently brought to the screen, and many of these film adaptations became seminal works of Hong Kong literary cinema. On 25 February, 2006, the Hong Kong Film Archive held a seminar to compare film adaptations of Ba Jin's works in Hong Kong and China. Speakers included Dr Ding Yaping, Director of Chinese Academy of Arts Institute of Film and Television and Ms Wong Ain-ling, Research Officer of the HKFA.

Dr Ding reminisced about his meeting with Ba Jin in 1993, and got the impression that he was a writer of great inner substance and a man of powerful faith. Since his debut novel *Destruction*, Ba Jin had steadily earned his place in China's literary canon for the moral and spiritual integrity reflected in works like *The Love Trilogy*, *The Torrent Trilogy* (ie. *Family*, *Spring* and *Autumn*), *Fire* (which uses the Sino-Japanese War as a backdrop), *Wintry Night* and *Spring Dream in Old Garden* (which depict the lives of small time folks), and even his memoirs *Sui Xiang Lu* (literally 'Recollection of Thoughts That Come to Mind'), which he published after the Cultural Revolution to 'tell the truth'.

Dr Ding mentioned two Mainland adaptations of *Family*. The first, made in 1941 by China United Film Company, deployed the company's entire existing cast and directors, and was critically acclaimed. Adaptations of *Spring* and *Autumn* followed, but attracted less attention than their predecessor. The second version of *Family* was made in 1956 by Shanghai Film Studio (SFS), directed by Chen Xihe. According to Dr Ding, Ba Jin was not exactly pleased with it. Ding inferred that the author dissatisfied with the treatment of the characters Kok-wai and Ming-fung. In the novel, their feelings for each other remain ambiguous and subdued, but the 1956 screen version explicitly represents them as lovers.

Moreover, Kok-wai's behaviour in response to Ming-fung's suicide also does not make much sense. SFS did not follow up with adaptations of the other works in Ba Jin's trilogy. Conjecture had it that since the versions produced by Hong Kong's The Union Film Enterprise Ltd had already been released in China, SFS felt that its productions could not surpass them, so they decided to leave it at that. However, Ding also pointed out that during that phase, Ba Jin's writings had come under attack for being 'white flag literature', so the studio might have wanted to steer clear of his work.

Wong Ain-ling, our speaker from HKFA, recounted her own brief encounter with Ba Jin. In 1979, Ba Jin flew to Paris for the launch of his works in French. The simultaneous interpreter for the trip happened to be Gao Xingjian, who went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. She drew our attention to the vast number of Ba Jin screen adaptations by Hong Kong filmmakers. *The Torrent Trilogy* (*Family* and *Spring* were made in 1953, *Autumn* in 1954) aside, there was *Ming Phoon* (1957), *Three Stages of Love* (1955), *It Was a Cold Winter Night* (1955), *Human Relationships* (1959) and *Garden of Repose* (1964) adapted from *Spring Dream in Old Garden*. *The Garden of Repose* was directed by Zhu Shilin, with screenplay by Xia Yan. The younger son of the novel's protagonist is changed to a teenage girl, and the gentle and vulnerable image of the male and female leads conveys sensitive, conflicting emotions, a melancholic tone and moving nostalgia for the hometown that is remarkably close to the spirit of the literary original. As for *Human Relationships*, directed by Lee Sun-fung, its title says it all, with humane family and moral values, a didactic tone and even a deliberate happy ending to make the film more accessible to the general public.

Family, directed by Ng Wui, was shot in a grubby, makeshift studio, but Ng took great care to express subtle emotions through effective film language. The memorable scene in the garden involving Kok-sun, Cousin Mui and Shui-kok makes full use of camera movement, contrast of depth and focus, lighting, combined with non-realist theatrical techniques of Cantonese opera to build up psychological depth. The male lead, Ng Cho-fan's virtuoso performance was highly commended by Ba Jin.

Ba Jin's works reflect great compassion and empathy for common people living in troubled times. These sentiments are clearly understood and deeply appreciated by 1950s Hong Kong society, still in the throes of hardship. Despite considerable production limitations, Hong Kong film professionals made a sincere effort to adapt Ba Jin's masterpieces to express their respect for Chinese social, moral and family values and their love for the war-ravished homeland. Through the cinema of this era, this important humanist literary tradition has been carried on. (Collated by Wong Ching; translated by Maggie Lee)

Seminar

The Voice Off-screen: An Evening with Li Ngaw



(From left) Chow Shu-kai, Li Ngaw and Siu Sheung

On 25 March 2006, Mr Li Ngaw, veteran of the radio and entertainment industry, shared with a packed audience his background, career and broadcast anecdotes at the invitation of the HKFA. The astute 80-year-old, accompanied by wife Siu Sheung, left no one in doubt that his mind and tongue are still sharp after his dialogue with host Chow Shu-kai.

When Uncle Li Ngaw was about 12, he loved watching Cantonese opera; he also took lessons in music and opera-singing, and hung out frequently at film studios. Soon he began learning to write scripts under Tang Xiaodan. At 24, he started telling stories on Fengxing Radio in Guangzhou while studying at Lingnan University, Guangzhou, and performing Cantonese opera in Foshan Zhongshan Park at night.

In 1946, someone bought the right to his airwave novel and made *Silent Dream* (1949). The film did very well, so other distributors kept approaching him to buy the rights to his radio-plays. Uncle Li's dramas were often based on his life and rarely about classical stories. His most recognised work *Crime Doesn't Pay* (original title *Flame of Lust*) also carries overtones of his own life. He sold the right to this novel to Yam Wu-fa of *Hung Look Po*; the latter made it into the hugely popular film *Crime Doesn't Pay* (Parts One and Two, 1949) raking in over a million. In 1949, Sun Sing Opera Troupe came to Hong Kong. Uncle Li gave them the green-light to adapt *Crime Doesn't Pay* for the stage. This operatic rendition was performed in Macau with Yam Kim-fai in the lead. As Li's career had also began in opera, he did not charge them any copyright fee and even helped Sun Sing Opera Troupe to overcome its financial difficulties.

Besides storytelling and writing novels, Li Ngaw had roles on-screen as well as behind the scenes. He appeared in *Plum Blossom in the Snow* (1951), *The Nobel Family* (1954) and *The Renewal of an Old Garden* (1955). In his film acting debut *Plum Blossom in the*

Snow, a story based on his first marriage, Uncle Li plays himself in the role of Kong Suet-ying, while the role of Hon So-mui is supposed to be his first wife. Li's most favourite works are *Plum Blossoms in the Snow*, *Crime Doesn't Pay* and *Second Spring* (1960). The last was inspired by the story of the Butterfly Lovers. Hero and heroine nurture their love by exchanging poetry and lyrics and this gave rise to Uncle Li's publication of his poetry and lyric collection. Blessed with a photographic memory, Uncle Li did not need to read his stories from script. But Aunty Siu Sheung, believing they had literary value, she copied his airwave novels and had them published as scripts.

The kind and modest Uncle Li never antagonised anyone in his life and was brimming with gratitude for his supporters. And he still has his mentor Tang Xiaodan's 'Wonton Writing Theory' very much in his heart. Tang had likened scriptwriting to making wontons. The broth is the basis of the whole film. Without a good broth, wontons would be bland and tasteless, and so would movies. Wonton ingredients include pork, vegetables, shrimp and mushrooms; wontons must be cooked until the meat is done but without breaking the wrapper. It is only then that a script would be succulent and tasty.

Uncle Li Ngaw's storytelling career was at first peppered only by sourness, bitterness and spiciness, but eventually sweetness seeped in. And thus the master chef fed his lucky listeners with a feast of over a hundred airwave novels which they consumed with equal gusto. (Collated by Edith Chiu; translated by Piera Chen)

Seminar

Film Professionals@location



(From left) Adam Tam, 'Dried Squid Shreds', Chan Mong-wah, Eddie Chan, Chan Wing-chiu and Kingman Cho

With a century-long history, the Hong Kong film industry has its fair share of dedicated and A-list professionals. On 18 February, instructors and students belonging to the 'Film Professional Training Programme' of the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (Kwun Tong) gathered at the Hong Kong Film Archive to share their ideas and experiences with several film professionals in the industry.

Filmmakers Chan Wing-chiu and Chan Mong-wah half-joked that the director is hailed as 'God' in the studio, but in reality, he is just someone who is expected to have an answer to every question—even as trivial as what to do if an actor is late, or gets a pimple and the gaffer demands to alter the lighting. Not only is the director a troubleshooter, his main duty is to reassure his staff, and make them feel confident about completing the shoot as a team.

Chan Wing-chiu said, to all appearances, the director is the cool guy wearing shades, pointing his fingers at people and ordering his crew around. Actually, the shades are only for hiding the dark circles around his eyes after many sleepless shifts. He is in charge of so many things—overseeing the script, the rehearsals, the training of cast and crew, the set construction and design. Even when all these are under control, there are factors like the weather, the location and other things to worry about. No wonder he is so fatigued. Not only that, the director inevitably has his or her vision or draft of how to shoot the film. Yet he must let his staff understand his requirements, and this necessitates communication on multiple levels, and the greatest tact. If the cast and crew are

professional, everyone will give his or her best. Then, the filmmaking process is bound to be enjoyable, and the result satisfactory.

The director is not the only person who takes all the pressure. The cast also has a heavy responsibility. A student who identifies herself as 'Dried Squid Shreds' shared her experience as the female lead of a short film. Before the shoot, she had some experience performing on stage. The biggest adjustment for her is that you can have re-takes in filmmaking, but on stage, you cannot undo what you have done. Chan Mong-wah, a filmmaker with acting experience, asserted that concentration in front of a crowd is of utmost importance for an actor. One has to get into the character, and distance oneself from it as soon as the camera starts and stops rolling. Chan Wing-chiu explained why some directors are fond of casting newcomers. Amateurs have a more direct approach to ordinary everyday life, and they imbue the film with authenticity. For example, if you get a teacher to play a teacher, the actor would be just living the role. Filmmaking becomes a living, breathing record of life's trajectories, especially when actors age with their roles, and bring with them their own real life experiences. All this can be captured on celluloid.

Adam Tam gave a roundup of his role as a cinematographer. Professional knowledge and technical expertise are absolutely essential. Before there were computer effects at one's disposal, the cinematographer was the next person after the director to decide whether to do a re-take or not. As a result, the pressure is almost as great as the director. During a location shoot, all matters can come to a head. The cinematographer, the cast and the action choreographer are all jostling for space to realise their visions. When they challenge the director's concept, the latter sometimes takes on the persona of a negotiator, while still trying to hold on to his beliefs.

Filmmaking involves not only technical input, but also administrative duties. These are generally managed by the producer. Speakers Kingman Cho and Terry Fung asserted that the producer's job is to control all operations, especially to keep tabs on the budget. If the producer fails to reach a consensus with different parties on how much to spend, when the production goes over budget, the film may be stopped halfway. Many productions prefer to use real locations. The producer has to maintain the costs for location shooting without compromising the director's and the cinematographer's ideals. In Hong Kong, many people are reluctant to let a film crew shoot on their private or commercial premises, so this poses another challenge to the production team.

Action and special effects choreographer Bruce Law recounted his fascination with exciting sports like martial arts and car racing as a child. He was initiated into the industry through his involvement in car racing. He defined special effects in the past as 'non-professionals taking charge of professionals'. Stunt artists were somehow expected to get injured as a route to gaining experience. Sometimes, despite making a hundred precautionary set ups, accidents still happened during the execution. Nowadays, conditions have improved considerably, and the budget has consequently gone up. Hollywood blockbusters can afford to spend lots of money on safety measures because their global box office returns are so high. By comparison, Hong Kong productions drain their financial resources on completing the visuals and not much is left for ensuring

safety and comfort behind the scenes. The action choreography is under extraordinary pressure to prevent or at least minimise accidents and injuries, not only because Hong Kong is so densely populated and traffic is so chaotic, but also due to the difficulty for stunt artists to obtain medical insurance coverage. He urged film producers to take safety issues more seriously, as this is the prerequisite for professionalism.

When asked how to develop new ideas for filmmaking, all the guest speakers concurred that in the past, the industry determined what kind of film to make according to box office potential. So everyone jumped on the bandwagon and killed off the idea. Nowadays, the box office is neither the sole, nor most accurate indicator for a film's success. With much information circulating in the media, it is not easy to gauge the public's opinions anyway. Lo believed that filmmaking should be a longterm business. Unfortunately, most Hong Kong production companies are run like a family business, without enough foresight and longterm planning. In China, corporate investors' dealings with the business operations of film companies have already caught up with international standards and practices—which leaves Hong Kong far behind. Although many people think that the huge China market would be beneficial to Hong Kong cinema, the guest speakers unanimously shared reservations. They asserted that attempts to break into the China market mean that filmmakers have to follow Mainland standards, which may circumscribe their creativity, and the finished work is neither here nor there. (Collated by Wong Ching; translated by Maggie Lee)

Seminar

aesthetic professionals@location



(From left) Bobo Ng, Bill Lui, Eddie Chan, Chan Wing-chiu, Venus Keung, Adam Tam

The Hong Kong Film Archive launched a seminar titled *aesthetic professionals@location* on the afternoon of 1 April 2006 at the Archive Cinema. Invited as hosts were director Chan Wing-chiu and production manager Eddie Chan, both teaching at the Kwun Tong branch of the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (IVE). The speakers were art director Bill Lui, cinematographers Venus Keung and Tam Chi-wai, and costume/image designer Bobo Ng. They took turns to talk about the responsibilities of their respective roles in film production, and share with the audience their interesting experiences over the past years.

Bill Lui started off with a brief introduction of the art director's workflow. Once given the script, the art director will prepare a working proposal for the director's consideration. Upon approval, the proposal will be passed on to the producer for location scouting. Taking *Infernal Affairs III* (2003) for example, Lui insisted right from the beginning that the fictional Hong Kong Central Police Station should be made as spacious as possible to set forth the premise for the drama. It is however far from easy to meet such requirements in the local film industry, for the stringent production budget should normally be reserved for the fine details of the set, rather than putting up large constructions which is nothing but costly. Fortunately, the producer finally managed to get hold of the Cyberport main building. It was later converted into an open-plan office, rendering exactly what Lui had desired.

Lui also supplemented that the art director's responsibilities lie far beyond putting together the set for shooting. Given the 'common practice' in Hong Kong productions

that things decided this moment may end up totally invalid the next, the art director must always stay alert to attend to the most unexpected complications on the spot. The experience accumulated over the past years thus made itself a first aid manual at hand for immediate reference. Lui recalled that once he was asked to fetch a load of weapons for a fighting scene, only that there was no time to arrange procurement from a retailer which was too far away. Putting on his thinking cap, he had cone water cups stuck all over some wooden planks with all the tips pointing to the air. Coated with a layer of metallic colour paint, the paper cups formed an integral part of the shield, though only as props for display rather than actual use. There was another time where he disguised the curved glass surface of the rice cooker lid as a contact lens—a close-up of the glass conjures up a view of the contact lens under the microscope. Conditions can be really harsh, art direction can yet be an immensely fun-filled job.

Venus Keung then moved on to talk about his role as the director of photography. He first pointed out that the expense on photography usually takes up an extremely small proportion of the entire production budget. One must draw up the work plan with extra prudence so that the most suitable equipment and filming materials can be sourced within the straitened budget. The costly rental for location shooting in Hong Kong also entails considerable spending. To make sure the shoot runs on schedule, all working procedures must be spelled out in advance, taking into account all the possible threats that may arise on the set. The host Eddie Chan chimed in to add that filmmakers work like a bomb squad, having to solve crises of every sort in the hardest of circumstances. For instance, owing to scheduling problems with actors or weather conditions, it is not uncommon that daytime scenes have to be shot at night. To make up for the variation of colour temperature, nighttime shooting must be enhanced by a light source of a high colour temperature to achieve the same visual effect. Keung recollected his collaboration with Tsui Hark in *The Blade* (1995), where he had to raise a tent to cover the entire shooting area, and hang all the lamps on the top to replace sunlight.

One Nite in Mongkok (Dir: Derek Yee, 2004) is another telling example of the many challenges posed against film shooting. There was a chase scene where the police ran after the protagonists. Keung proposed shooting on a footbridge in Mongkok, yet failing to win over the director who deemed it barely plausible to keep everything under control in such a crowded spot. At last, Keung decided not to place any lamps on the roadside but hang them all on the ceiling of the footbridge. The efforts paid off and few passers-by noticed the happenings on site, causing minimal nuisance to the shooting. It turned out that the whole shoot was completed smoothly only in a night's time.

As Bobo Ng suggested, the frequent physical contact with actors make the costume/image designer their closest working partner. The importance of costume/image design should never be underestimated, for a convincing image helps the actor step into his role, and eventually convince and engage the audience into the drama. She jokingly compared the director to a mother, who takes care of her baby (script), alongside the many babysitters (the other crew members). Projects may come up with varying settings or backgrounds, so the designer must keep a keen eye on people's life. Viewing films of every sort is needless to say, one must also soak up knowledge in various fields, such as

Chinese opera, folk arts, history, and far-fetched enough to even physiognomy. In time the efforts will ripen to form an encyclopedia in the brain for future use. The designing process itself offers plenty of room for creation. Even elements in western contemporary fashion can be applied to Chinese figures in ancient times, on the condition that the image stays in line with historical records.

Cinematographer Tam Chi-wai concurred with Ng's comments about the varied roles of the filmmaker, adding in jest that filmmakers are considered as 'freaks' by many, as they are expected to know virtually everything from ancient to modern, from Chinese to Western. Seeing the young generation as the future of Hong Kong cinema, Tam made it his calling to educate and nurture creative talents to bring in new blood to the industry. He chose an excerpt from a student project of the IVE Filmmaking Professionals Training Scheme, and shared with the audience the making of this experimental short. Despite the lack the financial backup, these works are freed from commercial concerns, often laying an even wider platform for experiments.

During the Q&A session, the veteran filmmakers were asked if China-Hong Kong co-productions, the rage in the meantime, are hard to accomplish. Bobo Ng replied that human relationship and work pace in the Mainland can be very different. It may take a much longer time to touch base with each other before the two sides can make themselves a team. What is more, film stars in Hong Kong often assume centre stage even behind the camera. Other than the director, some actors may have a big say production-wise, so it is not surprising that the entire crew have to be at their beck and call. On the other hand, the Mainland adopts the 'actor system'—what an actor is supposed to do is to act out his part. They generally show more respect to the professionalism of other members of the creative team. (Collated by Elbe Lau)

Seminar

Courting Mod—the Films of Kong Ngee

On 14 April 2006, the Hong Kong Film Archive held a seminar entitled ‘Courting Mod—the Films of Kong Ngee’ to complement our retrospective ‘The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee’. The second of our seminars on this subject, it was moderated by HKFA Programmer Sam Ho, and guest speakers included Dr Yung Sai-sing, Associate Professor at National University of Singapore; Mr Shu Kei, Dean of the School of Film and Television at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts; and film critic Mr Lam Kam-po. The seminar focused on the unique cinematic style of Kong Ngee’s productions and analysed its interactive relation to pop culture.

Professor Yung started off the seminar with an analysis of Kong Ngee’s productions from the perspective of Hong Kong’s cultural history. He put special emphasis on the interrelations between Kong Ngee’s films, the publishing, and broadcasting culture in the 1950s and 60s.

Regarding the print culture, *Blood Stains the Valley of Love* (1957)—one of the *Nanyang Trilogy* shot on location in Singapore and Malaysia—was adapted from a comic serial published in the *Singapore Daily*, *Singapore & Siam Daily* and *Sing Tao Evening Post*. That was also a time when ‘three dime novels’ had broad circulation, forming Hong Kong’s pulp culture. Between 1949 and 1950, Law Bun moved the base of his publishing business, Universal Publisher from Shanghai to Hong Kong. *My Intimate Partners* and *Let’s Be Happy* were both screen adaptations of novels of the same titles from Law’s publishing house. On top of that, *The Posthumous Child* was adapted into *The Natural Son* (1959). Another bestseller by Universal was made into *Case in the Mansion* (1959). A suspense thriller set in a high-rise apartment block, it exudes a uniquely urban ‘vibe’. In fact, crimes in the city are a favoured subject in Kong Ngee’s repertoire. In addition to Cantonese films, Kong Ngee also dabbled in dialect films, and the Amoy dialect thriller *The Maiden Catches the Culprit* (1959) was also adapted from a novel published by Universal. These films were not the result of by-the-book adaptations, but became harbingers of the brand new value systems and forms of expressions that three dime novels promulgate. The consumerist culture, which only emerged in Hong Kong from the 1950s onwards, when expressed through Kong Ngee’s urban genres, demonstrates the space for symbolism of modernity.

In the 1960s, when Ada Loke interviewed Chun Kim for the *Chinese Student Weekly*, the director divided the development of Cantonese cinema in Hong Kong into three phases: productions before The Union was formed, productions by The Union, and productions by Kong Ngee later on. The Union prided itself on its social critique and anti-feudalist stance. Thus, its signature classics are *Family* (1953), *Spring* (1953) and *Autumn* (1954), adapted from novelist Ba Jin’s *The Torrent Trilogy*. In comparison, Kong Ngee’s conscious cultivation of modernity and urban chic is a dramatic leap in style and principle. Chun Kim played a crucial role in bridging the gap and providing historical continuity between these two phases and production philosophies.

Kong Ngee's flagship company was founded and based in Singapore. As a cinema-owner/operator, the company expanded its business to Hong Kong and established Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Co. One fact is of interest to the understanding of Kong Ngee's development. Since Hong Kong and Singapore were formerly British colonies, the British-owned broadcast service Rediffusion operated in both cities. Their respective film industries also maintained close ties with the television and radio broadcasting industries. A case in point is *A Mother Remembers* (1953), which was adapted from a radio drama by Ai Man, broadcast on Singapore's Rediffusion channel. Directed by Chun Kim and starring Hung Sin Nui, the film version became a runaway hit and was the first film to be released on the theatre circuit for western movies. As this film was instrumental in securing Chun Kim's status as a filmmaker, he had no problems in persuading the Ho family, Kong Ngee's boss, to invest in a production company in Hong Kong.

Kong Ngee's works maintained a three-pronged relationship with the broadcasting industry. The first is based on the company's acquisition of filming rights for a popular 'airwave novel', notably *Mother's Boy*, Parts One and Two (1956). The second involved Kong Ngee shooting a film, in this case Yuet Ngee Production Company's debut film *The Dragon, the Phoenix* (1963), and then having Rediffusion turn it into a serial radio drama to promote the film at the time of theatrical release. The third scenario was to represent and dramatise what went on in the broadcast studio on screen, such as in *Prince of Broadcasters* (1966). Radio was a hot media in the 1950s and 60s, and Kong Ngee has well in tune with the times to unveil the lives of broadcasting celebrities on the big screen.

Kong Ngee's relation to the broadcasting industry is also a cross-media and trans-regional one. Cantonese films made in Hong Kong, like *Mother's Boy*, were often dubbed into the Amoy dialect when aired as a radio drama in Singapore. This was not a one-off case, because the majority of Southeast Asian audiences of Chinese descent were conversant in the Amoy dialect, rather than in Cantonese. *Cold and Warm*, Parts One and Two (1960) was also dubbed in Chaozhou dialect and broadcast as a radio drama on Rediffusion in both Singapore and Malaysia.

The choice of dialect in filmmaking brought out another issue. Kong Ngee's sister company Chiu Ngee was set up for the purpose of producing Chaozhou dialect films, but hardly any were released in Hong Kong. At the time, many Chinese opera films were being made in Mainland China, and they had a large following. When Kong Ngee realised the potential for such a market, the boss hired a lesser known troupe Tin Choi, which performed at traditional festivities, and used their cast to make Chaozhou opera films, as well as record albums. The troupe's leading actress Chen Chuhui rose to fame, and became a renowned film star in Singapore in the 1960s and 70s.

All this goes to show the closely connected and interactive relationship between the film, publishing and broadcast culture in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore.

Shu Kei observed the representation of male image in Kong Ngee's films from the perspective of 'the useless man and Kong Ngee's middle class taste'. According to Kong

Ngee's boss Ho Kian-Ngiap, the company targeted the younger generation of viewers, so film subjects centre around romance, and aspects of life like career, the clash between ideals and reality, as well as issues of the generation gap. On another front, Kong Ngee's contemporary style flaunted a middle class vogue and sensibility on a par with the productions by Cathay's MP & GI. The two companies might have some things in common, such as being Singapore-financed businesses, and being film distributors-turned-producers. However, each of these companies sported its own brand of 'modernity', and their stable of stars, their fashion, and the films' style and feel are all distinct from each other.

Kong Ngee's creative direction can be traced to the tradition handed down by The Union. According to The Union's, and Cantonese cinema's tradition, male characters are usually afflicted with crippling illnesses and wallowing in self-pity. Whether in daily life or within the family, these men feel they are failures. This is particularly noticeable in *It Was a Cold Winter Night* (1955) and *Eternal Love* (1955). For the disasters of war and the spectre of feudalism have conspired to weigh the Chinese male down with an extremely pessimistic sense of fatalism, so that he feels impotent, or that he has been made a social sacrifice.

In Kong Ngee's films, the male characters are often afflicted with either illness or disability, such as the hero (played by Patrick Tse Yin) whose leg handicap causes his psychological imbalance in *The Happy Bride* (1963). In the Kong Ngee's age, the younger people are no longer victims of war, but under the economic and class inequality within the capitalist system, the male suffers from low self-esteem. His self-pity gets twisted into discontent and anti-social feelings, and sometimes he even takes it out on women. In *Autumn Leaf* (1960) directed by Chor Yuen, Patrick Tse plays a pessimistic painter incensed with jealousy over the relationship between Patsy Kar Ling and Woo Fung. He takes out his grudge and self-loathing on the character played by Kong Suet. On the contrary, in *Forever Yours* (1960) produced by MP & GI, the hero played by Kelly Lai Chen is in the terminal stage of Tuberculosis, but a chance encounter with the heroine (played by Grace Chang) revives his will to live, and through love and sex, he is miraculously recovers.

Kong Ngee and MP & GI also differ from each other in their costume and set designs. The former favoured sets with a westernised décor whereas MP & GI's sets are more Chinese. Instead of dwelling on the grass roots and plebeian world like The Union, Kong Ngee represents an 'imaginary' middle class through huge studio sets of homes with staircases, numerous rooms, adorned with abstract paintings, and arched interiors rich in religious implications. The designs of luxury homes are pure fantasy, and reflect the underlying vanity of ordinary people. The lavish sets ironically create a kind of emptiness that arises from the spaciousness. Kong Ngee had aspirations for the economic transition that took place during its heyday, but it did not wholeheartedly trust these changes. The widening gap between rich and poor gave rise to anger, resistance and cursing. In comparison, the middle class depicted in MP & GI's films comes across as more grounded. The set of *Forever Yours* is more concrete, and the plebeian social backdrop is also a more accurate reflection of real life, rather than a mere installation.

Lam Kam-po made Kong Ngee's detective thrillers the topic of his analysis. Compared to the pathetic men cited by Shu Kei, the male protagonists in the detective genre tend to be confident and 'useful'. It is the female characters that are questionable, often treated as the suspects, or the source of crime, even though they are able to extricate themselves at the end. On another note, Lam pointed out that the structure of *The Ways of Love* (1964) is tight and meticulous, especially in its treatment of the film-within-a-film. As for *Dragnet* (1956) it opens with the scene of crime taking place on an American farm, which belies the film's fantastical treatment. Another detective thriller, *To Catch the Thief* (1958) modelled itself on the Hollywood classic *Rear Window* (1954). The plot unfolds from a child peeping tom chancing upon a murder case, and shows a lot of footage of contemporary streets.

An audience who attended the seminar made an interesting comment that in the 1950s and 60s, young people dismissed Chinese opera films and The Unions productions for being out dated and boring. However, since they did not understand English or Mandarin, they were fans of Kong Ngee's chic and contemporary Cantonese films. Indeed, Kong Ngee offered plebeian versions of Hollywood to a generation of Hong Kong moviegoers. (Collated by Edith Chiu; translated by Maggie Lee)

Event

International Museum Day Hong Kong



International Museum Day Hong Kong was launched from 13 to 14 May 2006 at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Piazza. To tie in with this year's theme 'Museums and Young People', the LCS D invited groups of young volunteers to participate as an effort to further their understanding of the museums in Hong Kong. Seen here is the HKFA booth which attracted a huge crowd.

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Thank You!