

## Feature

### Thoughts on Li Han-hsiang's Remembrances

Sam Ho

One special delight in studying the cinema of Li Han-hsiang is reading his remembrances, which, of course, is also a useful tool in understanding the director.

Li started writing his remembrances in the late 1970s, when he was invited by *Oriental Daily News* to contribute a daily column on his filmmaking experience.

He managed to find time from his busy schedule as an active director to write the column and kept on until his death in 1996. Those columns were anthologised into two four-volume collections, *Passing Flickers: Looking Back Thirty Years (Sanshi Nian Xishuo Congtuo)* and *Heaven on Earth (Tianshang Renjian)*. Though not written as memoirs, these volumes offer great insight into Li's life, his career and the creative process with which he worked. They are particularly valuable considering that Hong Kong does not have a good tradition for biographies. While Hong Kong had not had a lack of accomplished or interesting personalities, most of them had not been eager to pen autobiographies, nor had there been a rush by writers to produce their biographies. The Hong Kong Film Archive's Oral History Project is an effort to fill the void, yet the Chinese tendency not to speak ill of people, themselves or others included, often causes the interviewed to hold back on the truth.

Li's writing is valuable because he was willing to tell. He was also not afraid to tell. Having worked in the film industry for over 50 years, his sphere of influence reaching from Hong Kong to Taiwan and then to mainland China, he knew people from all walks of the industry, many with close professional relationship or friendship. He also happened to have a very good memory and was able to remember many of the happenings in great details. From his writing, we are able to obtain first-hand knowledge of many important events in the history of Chinese cinema.

True to the straight-shooting nature of his northern Chinese heritage, Li was often refreshingly forthright in his remembrances. He would tell unflattering stories of those he knew, many of them well-known personalities, revealing untold details of the film and entertainment industries. Of course, his writing was not exempt from the memory failures, unintentional exaggerations or even outright distortions, but such are the nature of autobiographies and, to his credit, Li never pretended to be objective.

Subjective though they are, Li's remembrances proved to be useful towards a better understanding of the Hong Kong cinema of his time. His recollection of star Yan Jun and the executive Albert Odell, for example, provides useful information about how Cathay Organisation landed its operation in Hong Kong. Odell, like Li, was an interesting character who had played a pivotal role in the post-war development of the then colony's film industries, especially in the dealings between the companies Cathay, Yung Hwa and Shaws. The Hong Kong Film Archive had conducted an oral history interview with him

preparing for the book *The Cathay Story*. Comparing his account with that of Li and the memoirs of producer Wong Cheuk-hon gives us a fuller picture of the events that transpired.

Also, using the examples of two topics on which the Archive had conducted preliminary study, Li's writing offers an interesting perspective on the situation when Run Run Shaw moved from Singapore to Hong Kong to reorganise the family business as well as the relationship between Chan Wan and Chun Kim, Kong Ngee's top men during the company's formative years.

Of course, the volumes also allow us to gain better understanding of Li's cinema. We can find from them clues of the director's fondness for northern Chinese folk culture, his obsessions with particular historical instances or personalities as well as his interest in certain types of stories.

*Sam Ho is Programmer of the HKFA.*

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### Sisterhood is Powerful: 'The Nine Sisters' of Cantonese Cinema

Yuen Tsz-ying

On 25 February 2007, a special screening event named 'Band of Characters: Unusual Roundup of the Usual Suspects' was organised by the HKFA in honour of 'The Nine Sisters'—a sorority of supporting actresses active in Hong Kong's Cantonese film industry during the 1960s. After the screening of *The Nine Phoenixes of the City* (1964), produced by the nine 'Sisters', six of them—Lee Hong-kum, Leung So-kam, Yam Bing-yee, Chu Yat-hung, Kam Ying-lin and Tam Sin-hung—showed their solidarity by stepping on stage to greet the audience. Only three of the members were unable to make it—Lai Kwan-lin, who had another engagement, and Hui Hing-hing and Ying Lai-lei who reside abroad.

*The Nine Phoenixes of the City* is a madcap comedy that casts each of the Nine Sisters in uniquely charming roles. Cameo appearances by hot stars of the period add further pizzazz to the film, drawing laughter and applause from the audience throughout the screening. The six 'Sisters' chatted happily with the audience, recounting how the sorority was formed, the many amusing behind-the-scenes stories about *The Nine Phoenixes of the City*, as well as their recent news. The audience responded warmly to the guests, and the event ended successfully after a round of picture-taking and autograph signing.

#### How the Sorority Came About

The bond of the Nine Sisters dates back 45 years. In the early 1960s, Lee Siu-wan and Cantonese opera diva Yu Lai-zhen founded Lux Film Company, and made many Cantonese opera films. Two of their productions, *Fun on Polygamous Marriage* (1961) and *Seven Phoenixes* (1961) recruited many supporting actresses with a Cantonese opera or singing background. The Nine Sisters were among the chosen, and they soon became close friends through daily interaction on the set.

When the shooting was over, they missed each other so much that they started to have regular get-togethers, and eventually, under the suggestion of entertainment reporters, they held an official ceremony to become sworn sisters. At the ceremony, there were ten members: Leung So-kam, Lee Hong-kum, Tam Sin-hung, Yam Bing-yee, Ying Lai-lei, Hui Hing-hing, Lai Kwan-lin, Chu Yat-hung, Kam Ying-lin and Hung Tau Tsi, so the media jokingly named them 'The Ten Sisters'. Then, Lai Kwan-lin got married on 1 June 1962. The other nine 'Sisters' arrived in identical dresses to show their solidarity, and announced a regular gathering on the ninth day of every month. When Hung Tau Tsi got married to Lam Kar-sing, she retired from all entertainment activities, so 'The Ten Sisters' became 'The Nine Sisters'.

Whenever there was any festive occasion, the 'Sisters' were always seen together in a group of nine. According to *Wong Fei-hung and I* penned by Director Wu Pang, the Nine Sisters not only spurred the forming of 'The Ten Brothers' (another union fostered by ten

Cantonese film directors), but also kickstarted a trend of social alliances in the film circle. Examples that followed include ‘The Eight Peonies’ by eight hotshot actresses, ‘The Twelve Golden Hairpins’ by twelve seasoned actresses, ‘The Seven Princesses’ by seven child star-turned teen actresses, and ‘The Eleven Axes’ by a group of production staff.

### **Diverse Talents of the Sisters**

In 1964, the ‘Sisters’ formed Heung Shing Film Co to produce *The Nine Phoenixes of the City*. A few years later, they adapted the screenplay for Cantonese opera, and engaged the services of Cantonese opera comedians Leung Sing-po and Cheng Kwun-min to record an album.

The Nine Sisters have dedicated their whole lives to cinema and Cantonese opera. Not only were they held in great esteem by the industry and their fans, each of them has her unique style and diverse talents. Leung So-kam is a distinguished Chinese opera singer. The daughter of renowned musician Leung Yee-chung and singer King-sin (aka Cheung Yuk-king), she was well-schooled in her parents’ art, and eventually cultivated her own inimitable ‘Kam voice’ style of singing. She also studied under the tutelage of Master Sit Kok-sin, performed with many opera troupes and recorded numerous albums. Leung entered the film industry in 1949, and worked her way up as a famous character actor. Even after retirement from the film industry, she remains active as a tutor of Cantonese opera.

Lee Hong-kum is nicknamed ‘Queen of the West Palace’ [Ed: the King’s scheming second wife who always plots against the virtuous first wife, the ‘Queen of the East Palace’]—a role she has played to perfection over the decades. Lee was apprenticed to Cantonese opera artists Tam Sau-zhen and Lo Hoi-tin, and toured Guangdong province and Southeast Asia with their troupe. After building a solid grounding in stage performance, she entered the film industry in 1956. Though she became a household name for playing villainesses on screen, she sometimes enjoyed the leading role as a virtuous heroine in opera performances. Even now, she continues to be active both on TV and on stage, tirelessly promoting Cantonese opera to a new generation.

Tam Sin-hung has been crowned *Meixiang Wang* (‘Queen of Supporting Actresses’). [Ed: *Meixiang* is a common name for a maidservant in Cantonese opera and costume drama.] She started out as a child actor under the tutelage of Yam Kim-fai, and worked her way up to *erbang* (‘second heroine’) roles. She has performed with numerous top artists of Cantonese opera, including being the understudy of Fong Yim-fun. She joined the film industry in 1953, but took an interim break before returning to TV and screen in full swing.

Yam Bing-yee is known as *Erbang Wang* (‘Queen of Second Heroines’). The younger sister of the legendary Yam Kim-fai, she lived and breathed Cantonese opera. With an illustrious 60-year stage career, she has sworn never to retire. She joined the film industry in 1948, and honed her craft at playing maidservant roles to perfection. She is best loved for her role as Woon Sha, maid to the heroine Fok Siu-yuk in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*—a role she has performed for more than a thousand times over the last 50 years.

Ying Lai-lei received formal training in Cantonese opera together with her sister Ying Lai-ming, and played many *erbang* roles at leading troupes. Since her first screen appearance in 1950, her personal all-time favourite film performance was in *The Romantic Monk* (1956). She has emigrated to Canada for years.

Hui Hing-hing was the star pupil of Cantonese opera screen diva Yu Lai-zhen. She was given many key roles in the stage and film productions mounted by her mentor. Later on in her career, she tried her hand at male *chou* (comic) roles. She has displayed her singing expertise in several albums. Though she joined the film industry in 1953, she retired from the entertainment world as soon as she got married.

Lai Kwan-lin was apprenticed under Cantonese opera star Chow Kit-wan, and performed in many different troupes. Her screen career started in 1954, but she later changed her focus to dubbing, becoming instantly recognisable as the dubbed Cantonese voice of Yu So-chau's roles.

Chu Yat-hung is fondly called *Changji Wang* ('Queen of Script Supervisors'). As the younger sister of actor Chu Chiu and renowned director Chu Kea, she grew up on the film set. She started her film career in 1952, and is the only one among the Nine Sisters with no formal training in Cantonese opera. She was promoted to deputy director and once held a very senior position in Cinema City Co Ltd. She was also active in theatrical productions.

Kam Ying-lin received training in drama in Guangzhou. After moving to Hong Kong, she divided her time between the stage and the screen. Since joining the film industry in 1961, she has excelled in roles of spoiled rich heiresses. She retired after marriage.

The six core 'Sisters' of the sorority still maintain their monthly get-togethers. Since Lee Hong-kum has been the most proactive member, she got voted as their 'chairperson'.

We salute the Nine Sisters' contribution to Cantonese cinema, and wish them good health. Long may their friendship last! (Translated by Maggie Lee)

*Yuen Tsz-ying is a freelance writer and film researcher.*

## Event

### International Museum Day 2007, Hong Kong

'International Museum Day (IMD) 2007, Hong Kong' was held from 12 to 13 May at the Piazza of Hong Kong Cultural Centre. 'Museum Panorama', a highlight programme of the IMD, showcased a total of 29 booths mounted by participating museums and institutions from Beijing, Guangdong province, Hong Kong and Macau. A wide variety of educational and promotional activities, including booth games, performances, workshops, exhibition tours and video shows were organised to introduce to visitors the work and functions of museums. The photo below shows the HKFA booth.



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**Thank you!**