

New publication

Oral History Series 4: Director Wong Tin-lam

Excerpted Interviews with Protégés and Son

Ringo Lam

Tutelage under Wong Tin-lam *The Selfless Courtesan Tung Siu-yuen* (1975)

marked my first outing in television (with Wong Tin-lam). He had taken on two assistants. I called his first assistant director David Lam Tak-luk ‘Big Disciple’, my immediate superior; he was the chief and I the deputy. As Lam became a screenwriter-director in his own right, I was the first assistant director and Johnnie To the deputy. When I left, To was promoted to chief and Lau Sze-yu the deputy, and so on and so forth. The cycle went on and on, like an endless list of family genealogy with its origin tracing back to Wong Tin-lam.

I came on a set, working without much of a cinematic sense, since the shots taken with fixed cameras on three sides looked as if they were directly plucked from a stage drama. You were only there to push the buttons. But out on an exterior set, a vista of possibilities opened up. There were and would be many agile ways of positioning the camera along the horizon; the cast was no longer pouring over the lines of a stage drama. When a shot was done, signalled by the shout of ‘Cut!’, the camera was repositioned. Filming shot by shot allowed the whimsy of editing to toy with the sense of space and time between these snaps, giving a more fluid and cinematic feel.

Uncle Tin-lam had a remarkable trick, which I later came to know as ‘stealing chicken’ (meaning ‘a sneaky way around a problem’). The budget was invariably shoestring, and the handful of available sets oddly familiar—the conditions under which *The Book and the Sword* (1976) was made. The sets were small and almost always crammed with people, standing or seated, waiting in a snake-like queue for their turn to deliver their lines of a wordy scene. To stay as faithful to the book as circumstances would allow, a fight scene that called for over a dozen of protagonists, and a bunch of bad guys sizing them up, made the shoebox-sized set all the more claustrophobic. But the minute the camera was panning left and right, zooming in and out, magic was sprinkled to animate the human snake. I remembered once I was choreographing the movement of actors down in the studio. Johnnie To was upstairs in the control room, seated next to Wong who served as his minder on the control panel. When it came to filming the fight scene in the pint-sized scene, I came up for a piece of wisdom from my mentor. ‘How to fight in such a small set?’, I asked. The master answered, ‘Just take the action off the frame, you idiot!’ So the camera began

to roll, and almost everything, some 90% of action, was tossed out of the frame, leaving only 10% of the feat within the set. An actor or two would occasionally leap into set, and out in the next shot. ‘Stealing chicken’ à la Wong Tin-lam worked wonderfully.

The Book and the Sword was Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB)’s first martial arts series. And what a hype it had created among the executives and those on and behind the screen. The period costumes and the prop weaponry were fun, so were the action, the wirework and the trampoline—all novelties on a television set. Wong also enlisted the services of martial arts choreographers like Steve Lee Ka-ting, who had all emerged from the ranks of the Wong camp to become some of the most commanding figures in the industry.

David Lam Tak-luk

One Breakthrough after Another Many people remember the theme song of *Fatal Irony* (1974) as the trendsetter of Canto-pop. The lyrics go ‘I fear you, my love, have had a change of heart...’ Before that there was no such thing as a Cantonese theme song... After *Fatal Irony* came *Madam Wan*, with Crown Record Company pulling the strings to make things happen. Wong Tin-lam was instrumental in the rise of Canto-pop.

From film to television, Wong had brought with him a wealth of filmmaking experience. *Mise-en-scène*, for one, since it practically made a film. A television script would have to make allowance for the intrinsic flaw of shooting with only three cameras. But Wong brought *mise-en-scène* to the box, and inspired many along the way. It means care must be taken in characters, action, timing and the length of shots, to which Wong had contributed so much. He had a flair for one more thing—screenwriting. He penned most of his scripts and knew exactly where to mark for commercial breaks, chewing over the gist with us, and always got his audience totally hooked up for the next episode.

Johnnie To

A Technical Filmmaker *The Book and the Sword* and its kind (martial arts) was a novelty to television. In fact, television directors lagged behind in filming the genre technically, and only did film directors like Wong Tin-lam have ways around to solve technical and logistic hitches up their sleeve. Other directors might come up with their own way of dealing with these problems, fiddling with buttons in the studio and manoeuvring their cameras out in the open, but Wong was exhibiting in TVB his unique brand of directorial marvel.

Wong was an out-and-out technical filmmaker. The time I was working for Wong

television was no longer a personal creation but an industry, and he was one fine technician, shooting problems even if he had to resort to 'stealing chicken' or other knacks. His mission was to finish the work on the dot, jiggling with flexibility and dexterous wit until a task was accomplished...

Looking back at his filmmaking career, Wong didn't shy from saying that it put food on his table. Without the job, he would have gone hungry. He apprenticed under his uncle (Producer Wong Pang-yik), learning sound-recording and processing and working his way up to deputy director. Trying his hand at screenwriting, Wong would take up low-paying jobs that others scorned. For one thing, he had a family of his own to feed, and that of his uncle's. When asked what his dream in film was, he frankly said if there was one, he had failed to hear it. Perhaps the pressure of life was the only reason to keep him going. For that I complimented his adaptability. Many a time in the most appalling, forbidding and scanty conditions he finished the work entrusted to him without qualms. His impeccable work ethic serves to remind directors like myself the duty to do our job no matter what. Failing it, you are unprofessional. Learning from his work attitude had benefited us most.

Wong Jing

Father-and-Son Team I began leafing through Father's scripts at the age of eight or nine... Most of them sucked, but I had my first taste of what drama has in store... Though I seldom saw Father at work, a bright kid like me naturally figured out he was a director and what he did. Ringo Lam and Johnnie To were his protégés, not me, really, and 95% of what I had learned didn't come from Father. My style, very distinct from Father's, and that of To and Lam, spoke for itself.

Father and I were taking different paths at the beginning of his stint with television. But the Commercial Television (CTV) incident [Ed: when TVB lost many of its executives, screenwriters and directors to CTV] reunited us at TVB as its pillars. A few drama series later, we were working as a team, on *Yesterday's Glitter*. It was 1980.

Father didn't really show me the ropes, and everything I learned, I learned it through practice, just the way he did back then. I couldn't be far wrong following strictly in his footsteps, and only in the rare moment of confusion did I come up to him and ask: 'Is that guy taking me for a fool?'

I was in the director's chair from day one, never a deputy. The day before shooting began, I asked him: 'Tell me, Father, how many types of lens are there?' So he began to take me through the A-to-Z of filmmaking. That night I went home with countless question marks in my head. Putting on a brave front, I arrived on the set the following day, and eventually got the hang of things on the fourth day. And not a soul knew that I was clueless. He was with me on the set for the first three days. I said to him: 'Come take a seat. I just need people to know I'm your son, so that nothing will fall off the light plank.' The last thing I wanted was some old hands jumping at the

chance to rough up the new kid on the block, and things turned out just fine. (Translated by Agnes Lam)

Seminars

The Voice Off-Screen: An Evening with Wong Jing

Date: 31/8/2007

Venue: Hong Kong Film Archive Cinema



Director Wong Jing (middle) sat down with critics Thomas Shin (left) and Lam Kam-po to discuss his film career and future prospects of Hong Kong cinema.

Wong Tin-lam: from Film to Television

Date: 28/10/2007

Venue: kubrick bc



Film critic Thomas Shin talked about Director Wong Tin-lam's foray into the television industry and his various contributions over the years.

Wong Tin-lam and Literature

Date: 10/11/2007

Venue: The Commercial Press Tsimshatsui Book Centre



Wong Ain-ling of HKFA (left) and Mary Wong of Lingnan University examined the role literature plays in Wong Tin-lam's films.

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Thank You!