

Focus: The 1960s

Production Notes for *An Emerging Modernity: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1960s*

Kwok Ching-ling

To catch the pulse of a growing teenage audience in the 1960s, many Hong Kong films of the time were devoted to projecting the youthful sentiments of that generation, which was striving hard to make its presence known. The quest for self-identity might have appeared naïve but was an indication of the emerging sense of people's individuality. Rather than obediently following the paths taken by their predecessors, filmmakers chose to do something different, more ready than ever to unleash their dreams and desires on celluloid.

Over the years, many veteran filmmakers active in the 1960s have granted interviews to our Oral History Project: these records form the core of this book. From the broad perspective of film history, the fruit of each era owes much to the collective efforts of numerous filmmakers. From the perspective of an individual filmmaker, the veterans featured in this volume have all spent decades in the industry. Although the focus falls on the 1960s, we have asked them to recount their creative journeys from when they first became involved with film. It is our intention to include their experiences prior to the 1960s, and examine how such experiences shaped their development in the 1970s. The same logic applies to the way the film industry has evolved: the experiences accumulated in each stage naturally affect the development of the next.

Vogues like dance party were the traces of 'modernity' found in Hong Kong cinema of the 1960s. Yet it is the people's psyche or inner world that is worthy of contemplation. During the 60s, the substantial body of costume dramas, particularly *wuxia* (martial arts) films, sometimes provided better platforms than contemporary films for subjects that slightly departed from reality. Some of the stories even took on the quality of 'fables'. Directors of the time were also eager to experiment with rhythm, aesthetics and imagery to give their creative output a unique edge.

This volume presents interviews with eight producers, directors and scriptwriters who recall their life with film in vivid detail. In many respects, what they went through was common to many fellow filmmakers, and their story a story of the film industry in microcosm.

Speaking of Hong Kong cinema figures of the 1960s, Connie Chan Po-chu and Josephine Siao are two icons that spring to mind. Both starting off as child stars, they were first cast as fellow disciples of the same martial sect (Chan in cross-dressing roles) in early and mid-1960s costume dramas. It was then the youth musicals, the genre from the last golden age of Cantonese cinema, that catapulted them into star status as beloved ‘princesses’. Wong Yiu, a prominent director of the genre, remembers how the boom took place, and how he added contemporary elements into his works.

Speaking of gems, the ‘Buddhist Palm’ series (in seven parts), the signature piece of director Ling Wan and screenwriter Szeto On, is arguably the classic among classics. In what ways was this series a breakthrough from the *wuxia* films of the time? What was its influence on the projects that followed? What made the *wuxia* movies by Hong Kong Film Company (1961–1971) so popular that the studio became a major force with the success? Answers to these questions, and more, can be found in the book. (Interestingly, these *wuxia* films, Mandarin and Cantonese alike, are fondly remembered for the rebellious nature of the lead characters, who are every bit as modern as the Teddy boys and girls found in contemporary pictures of the day.)

Over at the Lan Kwong Film Company (1953–1969), founder Wong Cheuk-hon made a mark with realist comedies that centred around the conflicts and hilarities of everyday life. A pioneer all his life, Wong traversed to and fro between Mandarin and Cantonese cinema, constantly opening up new horizons for the industry. His views towards the two cinema worlds varied at different stages of his career, and often reflected the market sensibilities that also changed through the years.

Yip Yut-fong, Peter Pan Lei and Ho Meng-hua, three other writer-directors making mainly Mandarin films, all bear the traces and characteristics of their times. Just like many other Mandarin filmmakers in the 1950s, Yip Yut-fong wanted no part in politics, but was unable to stay out of it. From Shanghai, the director brought his work experience southbound, and joined Great Wall and Feng Huang, the then major left-wing companies in Hong Kong. Yet, the two studios were besieged on all fronts to provide an environment suitable for filmmaking. Eventually, in 1967, the most tumultuous year during that turbulent period, Yip left to join Shaw Brothers.

Back then, the Shaw studio was well underway in its endeavour to break open the Taiwan market by recruiting directors from the island. A gifted writer having served in the military, Peter Pan Lei was one such director who became part of the Taiwan connection in Hong Kong cinema.

Ho Meng-hua's relationship with Shaws dates back to the era of Shaw & Sons, the predecessor of Shaw Brothers. He first tried his hand at special effects in his *Journey to the West* series in the mid-1960s. A mainstay of Shaws, which dominated the film business throughout the 1960s and 70s, he was there to witness all the ups and downs, including the 1970s when Hong Kong cinema was saturated with the 'fist' (violence) and the 'pillow' (sex).

As for studies on other major directors and screenwriters of the 1960s, the HKFA has already published volumes on Chang Cheh, Chor Yuen and Wong Tin-lam. Interviews with Chan Wan and Patrick Lung Kong are also collected in other publications. But unfortunately, we could not reach all the veterans we had targeted, and some had already passed away before we could arrange an interview.

The other feature articles in this book aim to offer an overview of the development of Hong Kong cinema. Under the theme of 'Hong Kong Cinema and Society in the 1960s', Law Kar, Ng Chun-hung, Donna Chu and Sam Ho talk extensively on the relationship between film trends and the social environment, as well as the many ties between Hong Kong and China. Cantonese opera, for instance, had been closely linked with Hong Kong cinema all the way until the mid-1960s, and Yung Sai-shing examines the trajectory of these Cantonese opera films, from the predominance of the Hollywood and China factors, to the rising consciousness for a local identity. Through the years, the *wuxia* genre has reinvented itself many times, making one comeback after another in Hong Kong cinema; Po Fung surveys the historical development of 1960s Cantonese *wuxia* films, as well as their characteristics in different periods.

During the production of the book, we again met with Szeto On and Ho Meng-hua to gather more information. However, some of the veterans we had interviewed years ago have since deceased, and some could not talk with us for health or other personal reasons; fortunately, we have been blessed with the kind assistance of their families to fill the void. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the filmmakers covered in this volume, their families, the writers, industry friends and acquaintances, and our colleagues. (Translated by Elbe Lau)

Kwok Ching-ling is Editor of the HKFA.

Actresses of Lan Kwong

Ting Ying

Wong Ain-ling

The youthful tale of Hong Kong's Cantonese cinema is often rendered from the 1960s. The heroines that come to mind are probably the sophisticated metropolitan girl by Patricia Lam Fung, the plain, unadorned factory worker by Connie Chan Po-chu, and the Anglophone-educated, rebellious Teddy girl by Josephine Siao.

In Ann Hui's *The Way We Are* (2008), which I watched during the Hong Kong International Film Festival, there is a story common to many families in the 1960s: Paw Hee-ching plays a woman, now widowed, who quit school as a child to work in a factory and pay for her brothers' education; the director inserts some documentary footage to pay tribute to these unsung heroines who made Hong Kong what it is today. In Paw's unflappable yet slightly worn face, I think of Ting Ying, an almost forgotten actress of the 1960s.

In the mid-1950s, the Liberty Film Company under Wong Cheuk-hon introduced two Mandarin film stars—Jeanette Lin Tsui and Ting Ying. Before long, Lin, the energetic, westernised 'Students' Lover' was poached to MP & GI, leaving the gentle and quiet Ting as Wong's trump card. A few years later, in view of the dwindling prospects of Mandarin cinema, Wong founded Lan Kwong Film Company which set out to make contemporary Cantonese films, the most impressive being satirical social comedies richly layered with witty dialogue and meticulous detail. Ting made the transition gracefully and became one of the most popular Cantonese film stars of the 1960s.

In retrospect, Ting's most memorable screen persona is not the long-suffering, feeble girl in such tragedies as *A Lily in the Storm* (1962) and *The Ill-Fated Girl* (1963), but the multi-dimensional working woman in *Three Females* (1960), *Factory Queen* (1963) and *Dim Sum Queen* (1965). Not quite yet modern, these women are on the way to leading their own lives. They can be difficult and aggressive at times, then as trusting and intimate as sisters. They long for the freedom to decide whom they should love, yet remain unwilling to fall out with their parents.

Ting Ying has one foot in Hong Kong's modern era, while the other hangs in the air—not that she is self-doubting, but that she needs to find the right place for herself—somewhere firm and safe. (Translated by Elbe Lau)

Wong Ain-ling is Research Officer of the HKFA.

Helena Law Lan

Lau Yam

Wong Cheuk-hon was good at nurturing new talent. Actress Helena Law Lan had already made no small name for herself by the late 1950s, even though primarily as an extra. Yet, these performances impressed Wong, who offered her a contract with the Lan Kwong Film Company and promised to make her a star as a she-devil. Her work with Lan Kwong would become a milestone in her career, and even her stage name 'Law Lan' was given by Wong.

We interviewed Law Lan twice, ten years apart, discussing her acting career during and after her Lan Kwong days. When we looked back at her roles together, it became clear that she did not always play the villain. While the cruel, larger-than-life characters in *Women's Affairs* (1961) and *The Diary of a Husband* (1964) show that ill-tempered face well-known to the audience, and the hard-to-please woman in *Sorrowful Wife from the Village* (1962) is never meant to be endearing, the woman she plays in *Secrets Between Husband and Wife* (1962) and the taxi dancer in *Landlady and Tenant* (1966) are both perfectly respectable and amenable roles. Her credits also include very complex roles: in *Factory Queen* (1963), for instance, she is the bickering co-worker of Ting Ying and, strategising to get the upper hand over her suitor, she slowly unravels the calculations and ambitions of a modern woman. Even in the villainous roles, such as in *A Lily in the Storm* (1962), she delivers a nuanced performance, portraying the character first as an unruly heiress and, eventually, a malicious wife.

Her three-year stint as a regular with Lan Kwong gave Law Lan ample room to try out a myriad of screen personas. She had the opportunity to act with Ting Ying, she broadened the rather narrow range of roles that most villain-actors were confined to, and in all, she made full use of the chance to polish her art. She has had many memorable roles in recent years as a seasoned actor, largely the fruits of the foundation she laid in her Lan Kwong days. All through the years, she has remained grateful to Wong Cheuk-hon.

Law Lan's professionalism both on the set and in our interviews is unchanging. She is always well prepared, recalls her anecdotes in the film industry with lucidity and

precision, and is also refreshingly candid about her work, her personal feelings, and her private life. In *Law Lan*, we feel the exuberance and joy of someone who thrives on doing what she loves. (Translated by Elbe Lau)

Lau Yam is Project Researcher of the HKFA.

Events

Donation of Trophies by Johnnie To

A filmmaker of over 30 years, director Johnnie To has kindly donated 39 trophies and a collection of photographic work to the HKFA. On June 13, at ‘Meeting Johnnie To: Film Award Trophies Donation Ceremony cum Seminar’ held at the HKFA, he shared an excerpt from his latest work, *Sparrow*, and talked with host Law Kar (HKFA Guest Programmer), Dr Ng Chun-hung (Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong), and Longtin (veteran film critic) about the preservation of Hong Kong’s film heritage as well as the future of local cinema.

Conservation is the talk of the town these days. Johnnie To remarked that film is a medium that records our cultural traces big and small, including shots of everyday street life captured in old Cantonese films. All such footage deserves preservation, he said. However, the sad reality is that Hong Kong films, together with the shooting materials, props and costumes, are typically lost for good once the theatrical run is over. Filmmakers of future generations are thus deprived of the chance to watch and learn from their predecessors’ works. In view of this, Johnnie To took the lead and donated his trophies to the HKFA, for a start.

During the seminar, he recalled his experience when filming *Sparrow* one night: he witnessed the unsettling protests against the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier in Central. Deeply moved, he added shots of some old districts into the film in order to pass on more of Hong Kong’s collective memories.

Dr Ng moved the discussion on and asked To how we can expose more young people to film culture, and what roles the government and the industry should play to protect Hong Kong’s film heritage. Johnnie To maintained that concerted efforts by the three parties are crucial: while the HKFA functions as a collection point of film resources, the industry should also play a part in the compilation of history, and the government should allocate more resources for the HKFA and the entire industry. He also

emphasised that film appreciation should begin at an early age, citing that in some countries, kindergarten students are taken to the theatre as part of the school day. Longtin supplemented that while the HKFA has screened programmes for secondary school students to learn more about Hong Kong's heritage, copyright issues remain an obstacle, and he urges the film industry to rectify the problem.

Dr Ng suggested that many Hong Kong films are shoddily-made, sweatshop style productions which are hard to trace. He proposed that Johnnie To and his company donate film stills, screenplays, shooting scripts written on the set, and above all, film copies to the HKFA for proper storage. To replied that he is more than willing to do so, but the process can be complicated due to copyright, where all decisions rest solely with the print owner.

The nurturing of talent is another key to the development of film culture. Johnnie To bemoaned the lack of directorial and scriptwriting talents, and advised young people who are interested in film to polish their scriptwriting skills before their production techniques. This would give them a better chance of success. (Collated by Katherine Iao ; translated by Elbe Lau)

‘Care for Our Community’ Seminar Series

(Curated by the Hong Kong Film Archive)

Dates: 28/6, 29/6, 19/7/2008

Lecturers and students from the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences of Lingnan University presented their research findings under the theme of ‘Care for Our Community’, exploring ‘Hong Kong People’, ‘Hong Kong City’ and ‘Hong Kong Life’ in local cinema.



Dr Lam Pui-wah (1st left) and students discussing the many faces of ‘Hong Kong People’ in local cinema.



Dr Mary Wong Shuk-han (2nd right) and students talking about the urban milieu of Hong Kong presented in local cinema.



Prof Leung Ping-kwan (middle) and students sharing their thoughts on 'Hong Kong Life' in local cinema.