

Seminars

e-wave: The TV Films of Ann Hui & Yim Ho



Left photo: (From left) Ann Hui, Yim Ho and Law Kar remembering the days when they made TV films for TVB.



Middle photo: (From left) Scholars and critics Lo Wai-luk, Shu Kei and Ben Wong examining from various angles Ann Hui and Yim Ho's TV films and cinematic output.



Right photo: (From left) Filmmakers Lau Shing-hon, Alex Cheung, Chan Man-keung and Yim Ho gathered to talk about TV films based on real-life events.

The film *Confucius* (1940) was lost for over six decades and not until recently did it again see the light of day. Even in that distant era, director Fei Mu was already recognised as one of the pioneers of filmmaking. He actively experimented with cinematic expressiveness, the interaction between history and drama, and other technical aspects of movie making. As well, he never forgot a traditional intellectual's moral responsibility or to uphold the conscience of art. During the 'Orphan Island' period, when society embraced a debauched atmosphere of luxury and dissipated living, Fei Mu devoted a considerable amount of effort shooting the epic *Confucius*, a work in which he painstakingly utilised the didactic function of art to caution the public. The ideals, vision and sentiment of this progenitor were similarly embodied by quite a few Hong Kong New Wave filmmakers. Mr Law Kar paid tribute to these filmmakers by curating a special programme entitled 'e-wave' for Hong Kong Film Archive. After last year's programming of Patrick Tam's TV films, he followed up with a retrospect of Ann Hui and Yim Ho's TV films this past February and March. Accompanying the screenings were three seminars that probed how these early TV films influenced their subsequent films for the cinema.

'Hong Kong New Wave' originated during 1978–79, when a group of young filmmakers, having been influenced by Western ideology as regards literature and art,

vigorously pushed aside old standards to introduce creative methods and boldly made films on sensitive subjects. Just a few years earlier, Rediffusion Television (later to become ATV), Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB), and Commercial Television (CTV), constituting a tripartite competitive force, aggressively sought young talent and gave them complete creative freedom, thus providing solid training to what later became the New Wave vanguard. Among them was Ann Hui, who insisted on using 16mm film to shoot *Dragon, Tiger, Panther* (#6) and laboriously constructed an atmosphere of suspense in both story layout and plot arrangement. She even openly states, 'A salute to Hitchcock' in the film credits. In *Social Worker: Ah Sze*, during a sequence in which a young prostitute is trying to escape the clutches of a swindler, Hui uses a high-angled crane shot to capture Ah Sze's panic-stricken run in the street as she futilely tries to stop passing taxis and then disappears into the dark. This dashing style leaves the viewer with an indelible impression. When the TV film was first broadcast, Hui laughingly recalls that it won her the accolades of her colleagues, who said it was 'very Bressonian!' Commenting on the New Wave masterpiece *The Secret* (1979), Dr Lo Wai-luk of Hong Kong Baptist University particularly commends the camera movement and multiple perspectives offered by the narrative style. These techniques show a further refinement of methods that Hui originally employed in TV.

Besides their innovative and creative style, the TV films of Ann Hui and Yim Ho also express, most thoroughly, a vital humanistic concern and introspective spirit, all of which form the basis of the two directors' later works. In *Seventeen: 1977*, Yim gives a straightforward account of the intellectuals' changing state of mind, their delusion, and the perseverance with which they cling to their beliefs ten years after they participated in the leftists' riots in 1967. Yim's later landmark film *Homecoming* (1984) further reflects his close attention to political situations. In an environment where different segments of society were full of doubts and pessimistic feelings over Hong Kong's turnover to Mainland China in 1997, the film analyses the contradictions that existed between the two lands and suggests the possibility of mutual tolerance. In the three TV series, *Social Workers*, *Below the Lion Rock* and *ICAC*, Ann Hui shows her concern for the drifters and powerless social groups. In her movies, *Boat People* (1982) and *Ordinary Heroes* (1999), she demonstrates that her regard for humanity has expanded to a broader level, which becomes one of the major

themes of her work.

Many of Ann Hui and Yim Ho's TV films are based on actual persons and events. Alex Cheung, another leading member of the Hong Kong New Wave, indicates that during the years they were collecting material and shooting the *CID* series, more often than not they discovered that the actual cases were more fascinating than fabricated stories. Chan Man-keung, who scripted some *ICAC* episodes, adds that in order to increase interest in the stories, besides drawing their material from actual incidents, they always included details not normally known by the public, such as the investigative methods and inner workings of ICAC. During the period when Hui and Yim were working in television, they actively experimented with combining documentary techniques and drama, which later influenced their filmmaking. For example, *Ordinary Heroes* is interspersed with excerpts from *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian* or details from the legendary Friar Peter Kam's life. In *The Day the Sun Turned Cold* (1995), Yim Ho, using the narrative structure of a family murder case, describes at great length and detail the emotional conflicts and moral struggles between the mother and her son. Yim's diversity of creative techniques can be traced back to his TV work.

The movies of Hui and Yim traverse various genres (this is particularly true for Hui) and regardless of the subject matter, they both emphasise character representation. Ann Hui recalls that after she left TVB and joined the community relations department of ICAC, Law Kar, her colleague at TVB, reminded her that when shooting the watchword-laced propaganda films she should not overlook including a normal human nature-based perspective. She also remembers that when she was working in television, she learned a principle that has always benefited her: 'We were very honest and sincere in exchanging ideas with each other and my colleagues did not hesitate to express their opinions of my work. They made me understand that filmmaking isn't simply about artistic style, but has to embrace the interchange between people.' Film scholars Lau Shing-hon and Shu Kei both agree that Hui gives careful attention to detail in portraying characters, and avoids presumptuously assigning moral judgement. Therefore, her character images are complex, meticulous and have a rich texture. Film critic Ben Wong believes Hui's women glow with radiating vigour, exemplified by the unforgettable middle-aged female characters in

Summer Snow (1995) and *The Way We Are* (2008). Shu Kei, using as an example *ICAC: Two Stories*, commends Yim for his ability to display rich and pluralistic human relationships involving different social strata. He also adds that at that time, there were serious differences as well as antagonism between ICAC and the police. Permission to research individual cases had to pass a complicated investigation and approval process. Ann Hui only worked for ICAC for one short year, yet she was able to complete six TV films. This achievement is something to be proud of. Hui recalls that when she was filming *CID: Murder*, the case was still in the hearing stage and wasn't supposed to be made into a film yet, but she pressed on anyway and made it without considering the consequences. Later, some of her projects were shelved by ICAC because the topics were too sensitive. She was young and aggressive then and, determined to stick to her ideals, ultimately resigned. It is evident that in pursuing justice, she is willing to bear the consequences. At a time when the local film industry trend is to produce films that will appeal to the Mainland China market, Ann Hui is still able to make *The Way We Are* and *Night and Fog* (2009). The strong personality of an auteur and the determined effort to uphold her belief in art are there for all to witness.

(Collated by Shirley Wu, Cindy Shin and Elbe Lau; translated by Victor Or)

Events

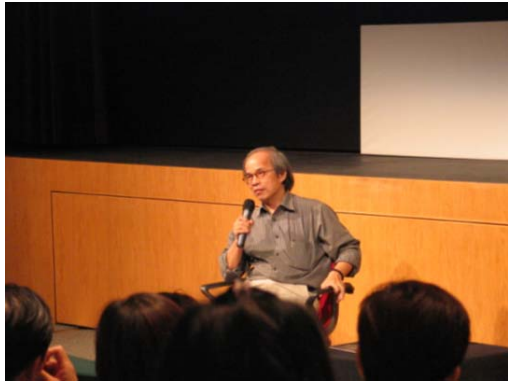
Confucius Post-screening Talks



On 3 May 2009, HKFA Programmer Sam Ho (left) and Project Researcher Lau Yam (right) discussed the film from various angles, including director Fei Mu's artistic considerations in his cinematic interpretations of Chinese literary classics, its highly evocative visual style, and the director's devotion to presenting Confucian ideals through film.



On 9 May 2009, film critic Cheng Chuen-wai (left) analysed why Fei Mu had selected the three disciples of Confucius as protagonists, as well as the director's ways of utilising historical materials. Among the audience was the seasoned film actress Fung Bo-bo (right). A veteran who knows the workings of the studio inside out, she shared with the audience her interesting observations while watching the film, together with her thoughts on the costume and the set.



On 17 May 2009, Dr Louie Kin-sheun, Honorary Research Fellow of Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, analysed how Fei Mu made use of history for artistic ends in his adaptation.

(Collated by Lawrence Lau, Elbe Lau and Cindy Shin; translated by Elbe Lau)