

Exhibitions

‘The Legend and the Beauty’: Exhibition on Lin Dai The jade, once hidden, is now returned to us...

Tong Kim-hung

For more than forty years after her death, Lin Dai’s bedroom was left undisturbed. Every single thing looked exactly like it had been when she was alive. Now, thanks to the Hong Kong Film Archive, her loyal fans, full of longings for her, are given a chance to take a step back in time and once again get a glimpse of her glamour.

Right by the entrance of the exhibition is a poster of the songs from the first film of her career, *Singing Under the Moon* (1953). Among them is ‘The Hot Blazing Sun’, which broke the record sales of album set by such famous singers from Shanghai as Yao Lee and Chang Loo. Even though she was not known for her voice, this remarkable feat won her the fervent support of her fans, and she continued miraculously to release records of more than fifty songs.

‘The Union at the Snow Mountain’ and ‘Love Under the Apricot Blossoms’ are two of the most moving songs in Lin Dai’s films. They are sung in the voice of Tsin Ting, who also released albums of the songs in her own name. The two artists continued their collaboration later on. We can still listen to the songs, but the screen diva is no longer with us.

‘Mom Wants Me to Get Married’ and ‘Have a Baby Soon’, songs from *Golden Lotus* (1957), were sung by the famed Yao Lee. For her part, Lin Dai narrated for the two songs on Yao Lee’s album, thereby adding to its appeal.

Half a century ago, there was not a single soul in the Chinese world who was not familiar with the name Lin Dai, which evolved originally from her English name, Linda. The stage name, Lin Dai, on the other hand, brings to mind the heroine of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Lin Daiyu. With the last character, *yu* (meaning jade) dropped, the name Lin Dai has lost none of its magnificence. Wherever it might appear, on the screen or posters, it seemed to augur an illustrious career to come.

Beauty being subjective, some may not think her the most beautiful of the stars of her age. Of all the Mandarin film actresses in the 1950s, however, who but Lin Dai could combine the skill of dancing that carried her through in *Cinderella and Her Little Angels* (1959), *Bachelors Beware* (1960), and *Les Belles* (1961); the talent for teary melodrama which won her for the fourth time the title of Best Actress in *Love Without End* (1961); and the gift of comedy that she fully demonstrated in *The Battle of Love* (1957) and *Lady on the Roof* (1959)? Though not the best singer of her days, she was nevertheless good enough to carry all the tunes in *Spring is In the Air* (1954), *Golden Phoenix* (1956), *Merry-Go-Round* (1956) and other musicals.

This is not to overlook her achievements in period pieces such as *Madam White Snake* (1962), *The Last Woman of Shang* (1964), *The Lotus Lamp* (1965), and other classic works. Her martial arts films are not as well-known, but the valiant poses that she struck in *Meng Lisi*, *Maid of the Jungle* (1961) and *The Swallow Thief* (1961) were quite dashing. Even in the *Huangmei Diao* (Yellow Plum Opera) musicals, with songs sung by Tsin Ting, she was most convincing with her lip-syncing. Her collaboration with Tsin was seamless; when she opened her mouth in *Diau Charn* (1958), *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (1959), and *Beyond the Great Wall* (1964), there was not the slightest doubt in the mind of the audience that she did not sing the songs herself.

Compared to the classic good looks of Betty Loh Ti known for her splendid period costumes, the 'Mambo Girl' Grace Chang known for her reverberating voice, the silver screen sweetheart Lucilla You Min known for her roles as a working class beauty, and Hsia Moon, the 'Treasure of the Great Wall Studio', known for her image as a housewife of comfortable means, Lin Dai was by far the most versatile and multi-faceted.

In real life, she was personable, free from any pretension and arrogance, which won her numerous fans from all over Southeast Asia. She won the Best Actress Award four times when she was merely 28, placing her ahead of Katharine Hepburn who garnered for herself a similar honour from the Oscar Award only in her seventies.

In the 1950s and 1960s, hers was the face that appeared on the greatest number of magazine covers. The Shaw Brothers launched the publication of its official magazine, *Southern Screen*, in 1957. Up to Lin Dai's death in July 1964, there were altogether 77 issues, and Lin Dai appeared on the covers of 14 of them. The rival of Shaw Brothers, Motion Picture & General Investment Co Ltd (MP & GI), began the publication of *International Screen* in 1955. Of the 57 issues that came out until 1960 when she made the last film for MP & GI, Lin Dai was featured on its covers ten times.

Besides these two magazines, *The Screen and Stage Pictorial*, *Oscar Screen* and a few others also put her on the cover of their first issues. There are countless other instances where she appeared either on the covers or the inner pages of movie magazines, such as *The Milky Way Pictorial*, *Movie World*, *China Screen Pictorial* and *Asia Entertainments*.

As I went through the exhibition, the most valuable item that caught my eye was her wedding picture, which not only captures Lin Dai's beauty, but affords us a view of her husband Lung Shun-shing. There is no question that they made a striking pair, one glamorous and the other debonair. Born to a distinguished family, he cut a fine figure in jovial society. Yet, after Lin Dai's death, he chose to remain single. He had Lin Dai's room locked up as she left it, and not until after his own death did their son bring it into the public eye. Whether that was an act of contrition or not, his steadfastness boggles the mind. His devotion to Lin Dai is clear for all to see, which might have brought peace to Lin Dai's departed soul.

Among the old clips are some showing Lin Dai's travels to Europe. Old frames capture the sight and sound of Paris and Venice of yesteryear. Like the reflection of the moon in the water, they are merely mirages of something no longer here, nothing more.

At another end of the exhibition hall, a recording of a radio interview of her was playing. This was the first time I had ever heard her speaking in Cantonese. It felt as if she was reaching out for another world. Very early in her film career, she made a failed attempt at taking her own life. Who would have thought that she tried again, and succeeded 13 years later?

In her last film, *The Blue and the Black*, posthumously released in 1966, there is a shot showing her weeping in bed, her back turned towards the camera. Pat Ting Hung, who played another character in the film, is trying to comfort her. An aura of death seems to pervade that scene. She was of course dead when the film came to the screen, and a feeling of eeriness, difficult to put in words, hanged in the air. The end of the film is full of the sorrow of parting, which weighed heavily down on the viewers as they stepped out of the theatre.

Lung Tzong-hann, the only child born to the couple, was still a chubby little toddler when Lin Dai died. Throughout the years, he has kept up with Fung Bo-bo, a childhood friend as close as a sister. His paternal grandfather, Lung Yun, was a senior member of the Kuomintang, while his maternal grandfather, Cheng Siyuan, was a representative at the People's Congress from Guangxi. Mr Lung Tzong-hann has now followed the footsteps of his forefathers in entering politics, and was elected recently as member of the Yunnan Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

The curtain will finally come down on this act of remembrance of Lin Dai, who, when alive, was the only actress working for both Shaw Brothers and MP & GI, the two rival film companies at the time, and, when dead, was memorialised on the stamps of Hong Kong. Yet, I believe her spectacular life will forever stand out in the history of world cinema. (Translated by Tam King-fai)

Tong Kim-hung is an aficionado in film and the oldies, and an experienced collector of ancient artefacts. He is very knowledgeable in Mandarin and Cantonese films and songs from the 1930s to the 1960s, and is particularly passionate about films and songs from Shanghai of the 1940s.

Seminars

Confucius: Cultural Significance

19/9/2009; Hong Kong Film Archive Cinema



HKFA Programmer Sam Ho (middle), cultural commentators Long Tin (left) and Leung Man-tao (right) examined the presentation of Confucian philosophies in Fei Mu's *Confucius* (1940), together with their development and significance in modern-day Chinese society as well as the global community. (Collated by Elbe Lau)

Hong Kong's Big Forture

21/11/2009; Hong Kong Film Archive Cinema



Film critics Po Fung (1st left) and Fung Ka-ming (2nd left) and cultural commentator Dr Ng Chun-hung (1st right) analysed the martial moves the Seven Little Fortunes performed in their films, their contributions to Hong Kong cinema, as well as their cultural role as an embodiment of the many Hong Kong stories that took place in the 1950s and 60s. (Collated by Elbe Lau)