



## An Exhibition on the Making of Martial Arts Films - The Stars Speak of Yesteryears

**Winnie Fu**

Veteran film stars are inevitably involved in the tightly-knit realm of love and hate in the movie world. Movie talks of the yesteryears are therefore realisation of their recollections spanning generations and years.

The coming Oral History Exhibition, titled "The Making of Martial Arts Films -- As Told by Filmmakers and Stars" contains two levels of significance. First, it is the reappearance of many veterans of our industry to relate their memories, and second, it retrospects on the development of martial arts films through extracts of video interviews whereby veterans speak about the martial arts genre and the pictures. The veterans that the Hong Kong Film Archive has managed to interview span from Chin Tsi-ang, Hong Kong's first lady martial arts star (insiders call her Hung Ma Ma), to Michelle Yeoh, who has now carried her fame and talent into Hollywood. Among them are prominent stars and directors who have long retired as well as those up-and-coming talents still working in the industry.

One such veteran active in the 40s and 50s was Lam Kau. He entered the film industry as a real kung fu expert. Lam speaks of his experiences when he somersaulted down from a height of 60 feet while holding two swords in his hand. There were no safety procedures and Lam managed the feat like the heroes of legend. Directors Wu Pang and Ling Wan are also among the veterans interviewed. Wu was famous for his Wong Fei-hung kung fu series, while Ling Wan was a director of the fantasy strand of martial arts pictures. Those who follow their footsteps in creating one fad after another include Tsui Hark, Ching Siu-tung and Jeff Lau, who have brought the martial arts genre into the area of high technology and modern special effects. Apart from the video interviews of all these personalities, the exhibition will also show clips of relevant films.

In preparing the exhibition, we have also managed to track down martial arts directors, such as Lau Kar-leung, Tong Kai, Tung Wai, Chan Siu-pang, etc. They speak of their early years, how they learned the martial arts, how they entered the film industry, and how they devised action scenes and weapons. Each combat scene represents an achievement in our film production industry; each story told an invaluable historical record.

The Film Archive's Oral History Project is now in its fifth year. Over 150 personalities of the Hong Kong cinema have been interviewed for this project. Their recollections, which include personal anecdotes, are a vital source of research into the history of Hong Kong cinema. The importance of these personalised interviews lies in its emotional contents, which in turn enriches the primary source for further researches.

To put together these interviews and to focus them on a theme or phenomenon is a more comprehensive way of looking at history. The added incentive of capturing these images and the celebrities' gestures and voices in a new preservation technology will make the whole exercise a more personal one to the viewer. Other items in the exhibition include film clips, a push-button soundtrack selection booth, and a video screening room which will show several martial arts pictures.



## The Closing Down of Theatres: Its Cause and Effect

**Bryan Chang**

According to the data provided by the Hong Kong Theatres Association, a total of 18 theatres had closed down last year, the reason being simply because of the poor business known to all. However, the truth of the matter is not that simple. Another 11 screens were put up in multiplexes in Festival Walk (Kowloon Tong's new complex) even as there were theatres closing down elsewhere. Indeed, it is a situation where one big screen is dismantled to make way for the installation of multi-screens. This is an ongoing process whereby the industry is dispersed and re-arranged and re-structured. I have thus interviewed two veterans in the theatre business, **Mr Chan Wing-mei** and **Mr Bill Kong**, to find out more about the "transition of the Hong Kong theatre business".

Mr Chan Wing-mei has several theatres under his wing closed down, including the ACME, Cosmo, Global, Prince, Sun Sing, Fairview. As the person in charge of two major circuits, Mr Chan points out that for a theatre to survive, apart from self-capability and improvements in facilities, one has to look at the changes taking place around the area and locality. To change from an independent cinema house into multiplexes inside a shopping mall doesn't mean that survival is guaranteed. "Take the Fairview Theatre as an example. Business was good in the first two years but the area around it had some shortcomings. There was only one Japanese department store and you had to walk a fair bit before you got to a restaurant. When a new shopping mall appeared, the cinema lost its appeal and there was no longer an audience." Mr Chan went on to speak about some of the multiplexes and the problems they are facing, such as the UA Whampoa cinemas. From there, the audience had to cross a main road before entering a big shopping mall. As to the Silvercord in Canton Road, Tsimshatsui, because it's close to the MTR station, it's more popular with the crowds. The Century in Mei Foo was located inside an old-style shopping complex and faced the problem of an aging population in the vicinity. As a veteran in the business, Mr Chan gave a trenchant analysis about his own and other people's cinemas, and the environmental and social factors that contributed to the problem. However, the biggest problem that the whole industry faces, Mr Chan confesses, is the prohibitively high price of land.

"Those cinemas that are built individually occupying a piece of land will continue to be closed down. The reason is that the property tycoons view it as a waste of land. They would rather build shopping malls and office complexes. The Liberty was closed down because of this. And the Empress was also forced to close down even though it had good facilities and was quite new. Somebody was willing to pay four times the rent for that space to run a restaurant, and so forcing it out of the business." A note of helplessness was discerned in the voice of Mr Chan.

Mr Bill Kong of the Edko Films Ltd was also of the opinion that the theatre business was facing the problem of the high land price policy of the Hong Kong Government. "At present, theatres not only have to have good facilities, a sense of space is also important. The basic ingredient for a sense of space is land." Both Mr Kong and Mr Chan agree that at present, Hong Kong simply does not possess the same conditions as other countries for cinema entertainment to be the main force of consumerism, with cafes and car parking spaces provided as well. This is true of the city and the new towns. However, it must be noted that Mr Kong runs the Broadway Cinematheque, which has carved out a market niche for itself.

"That was an accident. I believe if the Housing Authority were to re-plan everything, they would not have thought about putting a cinema in that spot. The rent derived from convenience stores and fast-food chains is ten times more than what you get from the cinema. Up to now, the Cinematheque is still running at a loss but we were psychologically prepared. We are in the business for the long run and the Cinematheque benefits our company as well as the industry. We are also running mainstream theatres but a healthy cinema environment must be pluralistic and diversified. You can't completely let the market call the shots, otherwise the whole environment just can't be sustained."

Mr Kong jokingly refers himself as a "special unit" in the business. He says optimistically that even if he had not established the Broadway Cinematheque, someone else with foresight would have done so.

Mr Chan and Mr Kong both agree that film-going in Hong Kong will advance down the road of more intricate development. That is to say that film-going will not just be an independent cultural activity but will also be aligned with other entertainment activities. Thus, modern theatres should try to get closer to consumers. They have not only to attract them to come into their theatres but to make it all the more convenient.

"The consumer goes inside a big shopping mall and he doesn't need to go outside; it's comfortable, the children are safe, they can enjoy the whole weekend ... the theatre business is like any other business, it has to go with the times." Mr

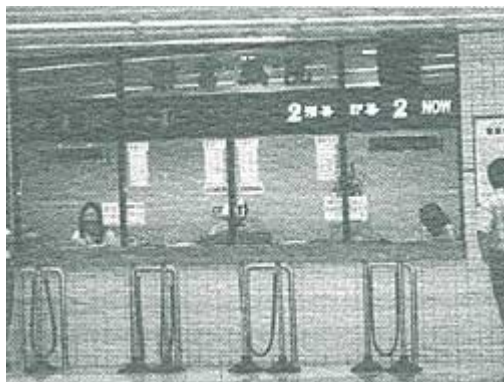
Chan views the business from the micro-economic perspective, speaking up for the consumer, while Mr Kong takes a more macro view.

"Home viewing isn't bad but people inevitably are social creatures. I don't consider that the theatres and the so-called home theatres are by necessity two different markets competing with each other. I am more willing to view home video products as tools in building up the interest and standards of the audience. The theatre has the responsibility to make its viewing environment more superior to that of the home. If it can build an atmosphere of social contact, then it is successful."

These words strike to my heart. When I remember a film that I'm fond of, I also remember which cinema I saw it in and whom I went to see it with. It is a pleasant memory of a pleasant time, and I am one of those cinema fans that still insist on going to see a film on the big screen.

Mr Kong presented us with data showing that in the 90s, film-going activity actually increased in all the theatres in the big cities of the world. New audiences continue to be cultivated. Though times may be difficult, the conditions remain for Hong Kong to make a successful transition and bring the audiences back to the cinemas. However, the problem with pirated VCDs yet remains to be worrying. "Once this problem is solved, I believe that the theatre business will revive overnight."

We all look forward to that day.



Closure of the relatively new Fairview, a sad sight to behold.



The once glamorous State Theatre has already waved the audience goodbye.

The closure of a cinema signals the beginning of our acquisition trip.

**Bryan Chang**, film-critic, script-writer and independent film director. He was adviser to the Hong Kong Film Archive in 1999.



## The Closing Down of Theatres: Its Cause and Effect

Agnes Lam

### **Curtains Down and Theatres Closed**

In the old days, cinemas were very much connected with their localities. Such intimacy can no longer be attained with the rise of the multiplexes. The old style cinema houses had strong local flavours, such as the Palace, the State, and the Lee Theatre -- all cinemas glittered alongside with their respective glamorous shopping complexes on the island side. Filmgoers have their favourite cinemas and emotional links are built. Thus, once these cinemas close down and are demolished for redevelopment, the sense of loss is incalculable, causing filmgoers to wax nostalgic about their old, favourite haunts:

### **Yaumati Theatre, Not a Theatre for Minority**

Located at the heart of Shanghai Street in Yaumatei's busy fruit market, Yaumati Theatre was well known for being a "Category III" theatre in recent times. With its slogan "With a single ticket, you laugh till you drop", the Yaumati Theatre indeed stands out from other circuits of cinemas. However, few knows that its history extends back to the days of silent cinema in the 1920s. It was all along a cinema that showed first-run Hong Kong pictures, with a seating capacity of 962 -- a pretty big cinema in the old days and even now. In the old days, a ticket cost from 70 cents to two dollars. From the 1930s onwards, newspapers took to advertising the cinema as the "Yaumati Sound Picture Cinema". The cinema was no doubt a witness to Hong Kong cinema's development from silent to sound pictures and indeed throughout the century. What a pity therefore that after some 70 years of existence, Yaumati was closed down in July last year.

### **The Theatre That You Don't Need A Ticket to Enter**

Located in the northern district of the New Territories, there exists a theatre that you don't need to buy tickets to enter since November last year. The old style cinema house Hang Lok is located in Sek Wu, Sheung Shui. In the old days, it could seat over 800 people. Though the cinema house still stands as old, changes have been instituted inside. The auditorium has been modified into a flea market where the once seating area is now taken up by retailing stalls. Since the cinema closed its operations, the management has come up with the ingenious idea of integrating the touch of the old neighbourhood with the traditional norms of going out for entertainment. The flea market is a ploy to keep its loyal audiences from the old days. Audience of the old days would fondly remember that before a film

started, the sounds of wooden stools and chairs would make up the hurly-burly. Then the faithful old usher showed people to their seats. This fellow with his trademark moustache has been on the job since the inception of the cinema and has never failed to man his position, come rain or shine. In the old days, it was said that he used to grasp a whip in his hand. As such, he was the scourge of those naughty boys who stole into the cinema without buying tickets.



Raising still the eye-catching red banner, Yaumati was sadly closed down.



Yaumati has gone through the ups and downs of the Hong Kong film industry in the past 70 years.





Hang Lok - cinema with a unique style.



The Broadway Cinematheque has carved out a market niche for itself.



*An Unforgettable Journey to America  
- In Search of Veterans of Hong Kong Cinema*

**Winnie Yuen**

Since the Hong Kong Film Archive inaugurated its Oral History Project in 1994, more than 150 personalities (as of Feb 99) of Hong Kong cinema have recorded their film experience in a series of video interviews.

Quite a number of Hong Kong's screen and opera actors have migrated overseas, with the bulk of them living in the United States of America. In a private trip to the States, I have taken the opportunity to look up many of these veterans and interview them on behalf of the Archive. It was the day of the Autumn Moon Festival, 5 October 1998, when I embarked on my unforgettable journey, all alone with a portable video camera.

My first stop was New York, America's most prosperous city and the world's financial centre. I had heard that many ex-movie stars of Hong Kong cinema were now living there, right in the heart of Chinatown. I was helped by my god-sister, Margarita, who was close to these now-forgotten veterans of the screen -- people such as Siu Yin-fei, Molly Wu Ka, Lo Ban-chiu, Tam Sau-zhen, Koo Ching-fung and Law Lai-kuen. Margarita made appointments with them and I set forth excitedly to meet them. Many of them were now enjoying their retirement years, playing mahjong and passing their days watching videos of Hong Kong TV serials and movies. Lo Ban-chiu would occasionally perform on stage, while also teaching Cantonese opera. Molly Wu had opened a boutique.

My second stop was San Francisco. The Chinese living in America call it the "The Big Town" and my impression of it was like that of an ancient city with glorious scenery right out of a painting. The city also had many famous cinemas that showed old Cantonese movies -- cinemas like the World Theatre, the Great Star Theatre and Sun Sing Theatre. Though they are all sadly closed now, many famous artists of Hong Kong stage and screen still live in town. Margarita again set up the appointments and I was assisted by Miss Ho Kim-yi, vice-chairperson of the Western America Ba Wo Association, to liaise interviews with Law Kim-long, Chun Siu-lei, Au Kar-sing, Cheung Mo-lau, Chan Yim-nung, Leng Siu-fong, Chow Kwun-ling and Leung Ying. They had the same graceful carriage as in their heyday. Chow Kwun-ling, Cheung Mo-lau, Chun Siu-lei and Chan Yim-nung would occasionally meet at the Western American Ba Wo Association and take part in charity events.

However, my greatest discovery in this journey was to have met Ng Kam-ping, the sister of Hong Kong's first woman director Ng Kam-ha. She supplied me with many rare materials and photographs of her sister's life, including a still from *Girl of the Golden Gate*, showing the infant Bruce Lee. What a precious find!



Ng Kam-ha, Hong Kong's first ever woman director.



Ng Kam-ping, sister of Ng Kam-ha.

My third stop was Los Angeles, where I stayed in the home of Tang Mei-mei, another veteran of the silver screen. By fateful coincidence, I discovered that living in the flat below was none other than Ouyang Shafei, the star of the spy thriller *Code Number One*. I also had the opportunity to watch a performance of *The Emperor Han's Dream Meeting with Lady Wei*, given by the opera stars of yesteryear Ho King-fan, Lau Yuet-fung and Yim To-hung. Cantonese opera is still very popular in the United States and many troupes visit the country on tour, usually performing in school halls because of the lack of venues. The American-Chinese still indulge in the practice of giving "silver tokens" or bouquets filled with money to the performing artists.



The author and Auyang Sha-fei.

With the help of my hosts Tang Mei-mei and Ouyang Shafei, I was able to meet Mui Lan, Chan Lo-mei, Ha Bo-lin, Wong Chiu-fung, Lee Choi-ying, Cheung Ching, Jenny Wu, and director Law Ma. Not all of them agreed to be interviewed but what an honour to have met them!



Jenny Wu as magnetic as ever.

My last stop was San Diego. I went there by train alone to meet Au Kar-wai, and we had a good chat.

Without knowing it, I had already spent more than fifty days in the United States, traversing the whole country and meeting more than 30 people, causing not a few inconveniences to friends as well as to the veterans themselves. But I was happy to have met my idols. They were as magnetic as when they were young, all in good health, good spirits. Their children now settle in America with good careers. In their spare time, they would watch videos of Hong Kong TV series and movies to kill time, or play mahjong. They were concerned about Hong Kong and read up on news about the territory. The younger ones established new careers or opened businesses, such as boutiques, restaurants, jewellery shops, music centres. Some even took up missionary work. What touched me most was that they all treated me like a daughter or niece. Some came long distances so that they could be interviewed by me.

Some of my most memorable impressions during my journey were of veterans like Siu Yin-fei, whose charitable work among orphans and relatives of people in the profession is now legend and it gave her the nickname of "Home-Getter Ping" (Ping being her own name). Then there is Molly Wu, who re-established herself in a new career in fashion design after she retired from the screen and is now entrenched in the American society. Chun Siu-lei had once studied the skills of acrobatics in the States and returned to Hong Kong a supreme artist. In 1938, she was invited to perform in the opening ceremony of the Golden Gate Bridge. Her talent and skills have earned her the nickname, "Tan Kei Incarnate" (Tan Kei

being the name of a legendary beauty).



The author (right) with Molly Wu, now enjoying life in her idyllic "new-found" home.

The Oral History Project serves to preserve the history of cinema as told by its personalities. They are taped on video and are then filed in the Archive for use by researchers and scholars.

My mission in America was completed smoothly, all due to my friend Margarita and Tang Mei-mei. I thank them here for their care and assistance. Last but not least, I wish to thank each of these veterans. Without their support and help, my mission would not have been possible. Besides those mentioned in the article above, my thanks also go to:

Mr Lui Hang, Mr Kwong Man-lam, Miss Yin Suet-fun, Mr Chan Yin-ming, Miss Wong Lau-zhen, Mr To Yat-fung, Miss Lee Hoi-tong, Miss Ho Kim-yi, Mr Ma Chiu, Mr Chan Ho-ming, Mr Tang Bing-keung.



The once Cinema Paradiso for movie fans of the Chinese community - San Francisco's World Theatre.

**Winnie Yuen**, an ardent fan of Cantonese movies and a collector of movie memorabilia, is now involved in film material acquisition projects.

## Interview Highlights

### Lo's Two "Stormrider" Films



Star of opera and screen, Lo Ban-chiu is still involved with opera, taking in students to whom he can impart his knowledge skills.

"...My deepest impression is that of the patriotic film *Incident In the Pacific* (1938) in which I co-starred with Lee Yi-nin and Chan Tin-tsung. We sang Mandarin songs, not Cantonese opera. The other film that I remember most is *Shaking Heaven and Earth* (1938). These two films are very good. I was pretty well-built at the time and when I put on a uniform, I did have the "killer look"! And then there was the patriotic spirit -- so passionately patriotic in fighting the enemy."

"I was more in tune with Tong Tik-sang. There was massive corruption in the government and he wrote a period drama called *If I Were King* (1948), set in ancient times about corrupt officials and the emperor's wife conniving with relatives while he remains blind to events. The play was successful and so was the movie adapted from the play."

### Law Kim-long Established His Own Production Company

"...I established Guozhen so that I could produce melodramas. At the time, we had a strong lineup of recording experts. We employed the famous Liang Yueyin from the Mandarin studios to be the conductor of our grand chorus of 60 members. The song was the "Spring Field Melody", Fong Yim-fen's favourite song. However, you couldn't make a melodrama too melodramatic, otherwise it wouldn't sell. Fong's last movie before her marriage, *Follow the Husband* (1959), was produced by my company. I organised a banquet at the studio to bid farewell to Fong Yim-fen before her wedding and scenes from the banquet were included



in the film's prologue."

### **Siu Yin-fei and Her Destiny as a Singer**



Film brochure of *A Cuckoo's Spirit* (1954) featuring Siu Yin-fei.

"I was fond of Cantonese opera when I was small... I would listen to the songs on radio by stealth; at the time Yuet Yee was very popular... My godfather ran a tea house. One day, one of his singers went missing and I was asked to replace her. They said my voice was not bad and even got Ng Yat-siu to compose song numbers for me... I was fond of making tragic movies, and of singing sad songs. If the director wants me to or if the plot allows it, I would sing the main theme."

### **Chun Siu-lei, Skilled Acrobat and Actress**



(2nd row from 2nd left) Chun Siu-lei and Law Kar-kuan in *TANJI IN THE MEAT HILL* (1958).



(From left) Yee Chau-shui, Chun Siu-lei and Lee Hoi-chuen in *BUSINESS IS BLOOMING* (1958).

"...In 1939, there was an inaugural ceremony of the Golden Gate Bridge and many acrobatic troupes and performers were invited to take part. The head of the Guangdong Acrobatic Troupe, Au-yeung Fat, passed through Hong Kong to select a young girl performer. He saw me in *Hua Mulan* where I performed tricks with a bronze rod and did a sword dance and he praised my performance. After performing in America for several months, I was curious or otherwise bored and

that was what led me to see how the Westerners perform acrobatics. I met a lady coach and thus I was trained in the 'body-bending' technique. I studied for three months and I also learned other tricks..."

"...After several years of war, we were all extremely gloomy and so we didn't want to make sad and tragic films. Being young and fearless, I did this seduction scene in *Tan Kei in the Meat Hill* (1949) where I put on a sexy costume, and this caused a sensation. At the time, stage people were very conservative. Women were either playing chaste wives or magnanimous lady knights. No one would expect them to put on erotic costumes."



**Classic of the Supernatural Martial Arts Genre:  
The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple (1928)**

In discussing the origins of the supernatural martial arts genre, one has to go back in time -- to 1928 and the picture entitled *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* produced by the Mingxing Film Company of Shanghai. An adaptation of a martial arts novel, the film became so popular that another 18 films were produced making up a long-running series. Within four years, Shanghai became the hub of the blooming genre, producing nearly 250 similar films. It was said that many youngsters imitated on the film, leaving homes in search of the mythical powers on Mount Emei. The government stepped in and banned the production of this genre of films, proclaiming it a bad influence on youth.

*The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* was adapted from the best-selling novel *The Legend of the Strange Swordsman*. The story is set in Hunan province and tells of the conflict between two counties. Both sides seek help from martial arts experts, but the conflict extends to one between the rival camps -- the Kunlun and the Kongdong.

According to the memoirs of Gong Jianong, who played the part of Zhao Zhenwu in the first episode of the series, all the staple elements of the martial arts genre were first displayed in that series, including flying swords, palm power, laughing, crying, and voice kung fu, secret panels and weapons and the rigging of wires in the flying motion sequence.

Mingxing recruited some 300-400 choreographers and stunt artists from the Malisi Martial Arts Repertory Company (an agency for martial arts combatants), and hired expert trainers for coaching actors.

Mr Yu Mo-wan, Research Coordinator of the Film Archive and a collector himself, has collected a complete set of precious handbills for all 18 films in *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* series. The handbills include the synopses and cast lists of each film in the series. From the cast lists, we can determine that the male and female leads in the first episode were Zheng Xiaoqiu and Xia Peizhen, while Butterfly Wu made her appearance from the fourth episode onwards, playing the female lead character Hua Shurong. Wu also played the part of the Red Maiden in *Episodes 6, 8, and 11*.

Examining the handbills, we also discover that renowned director Cai Chusheng played the role of a disciple of the Laughing Monk in *Episode 7*.

The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple was remade many times. In 1950, director Chen Huanwen made a version, director Ling Wan came up with another in 1963, while Ringo Lam directed another version in 1994. *The Strange Hero*, produced in 56 and 65 and directed by Wong Tin-lam and Tsui Tsang-wan respectively, are adaptations of the same story.



A scene from (1928).



Three precious handbills kept by collector Mr Yu Mo-wan.