

## Unforgettable Art Direction in Films

**Keeto Lam**

From the moment I fell in love with the movies, I cultivated the habit of appreciating a movie from my intuitions. If I was somehow touched by a movie -- whether it be love or hate -- I would hope to see it again before making my appraisal. And, on my second viewing, the deeper levels of a picture slowly reveal themselves to me as the dramatic effects withdraw into the background as an immovable structure. It is at this time that the functions of the artistic elements become evident to me.

Art in films covers a very broad field, from sets, wardrobe, make-up, hair-dressing, props to lighting and colour, etc. Very often, a film without much content can be enriched purely by its artistic merits.

When I was small, my grandmother, parents, and my sisters loved to go to the movies. My most delightful memory as a child was that of being carried into the cinema by my loved ones.

In the early days, the Hong Kong cinema did not have such a post as art director. The art director would often appear in the guise of other credits, such as art designer, set designer, costume designer, hair-dresser. They would in fact leave their marks in the films, but their names would fade out in the course of time. To this day, I have often wondered who was responsible for the design of that horizontal well in *The Magic Cup* (1961) -- that magic well that intimated signs of danger appearing everywhere as the leading child star Bobo Fung descends into it. Or who it was that was responsible for making use of western techniques of matte photography marrying sets of palace models with painted backdrops. Indelible images I have carried with me from my childhood, such as that of the 'heaven beyond the heavens' in *Young and Furious* (1966), the "pool of blood" in *The Snowflake Sword* (1964), and the Persian palaces in *The Romance of Jade Hall* (1957) and *The Magic Lamp* (1960) are forever imprinted on my memory. Surely, the most outstanding set designers of the cinema of that era, names such as Lo Ki-ping, and the Wan Brothers -- Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan -- are the unsung heroes. They were responsible for the props, sets and animated designs that were as much a part of a film's success as anything else. Among Lo's credits were *Buddha's Palm* (1964), *Big Clumsy Melon* (1958), *Ten Brothers* (1959).



Outstanding images of the ten brothers and the giant fish in *The Ten Brothers vs the Sea Monster* (60).

In the 70s, I was a full-fledged film addict. Cinemas were my gardens of Eden. The black and white Cantonese cinema had given way to the colour productions of the Mandarin cinema. The big productions of the major studios -- Shaw Brothers, Golden Harvest, Clearwater Bay Studio -- all had big luxurious sets as crowd pullers. I remain particularly impressed by the art designs of the Shaw Brothers pictures -- pictures that still remain locked up in the vaults and have been rarely revived since their first releases. I can never forget the sets in Li Hanxiang's epics *The Empress Dowager* (1975) and *The Last Tempest* (1976), Chor Yuen's martial arts adaptations from Gu Long's novels, etc. What a shame these films have not been revived nor are they made available on video. How I wish they could be seen once more on the big screens.

In the 80s, I became not merely a film lover, I found work as a professional in the film industry. I then had a closer look at how the art departments work in the making of films. I saw at first hand the impact that the New Wave exerted on the Hong Kong film industry, and the new flare and glamour it brought about. As the action film genre came into prominence, bringing Hong Kong cinema into the forefront of world recognition, the role of the art director became correspondingly more important in the designing of action. As an example, the films of Jackie Chan would not be what they are without the function of the art director in making sets suited for action. The colonial street milieu of *Mr Canton and Lady Rose* (1989), the hill squatters village in *Police Story* (1985), the secret headquarters in *Armour of God II: Operation Condor* (1991) are apt examples. Other examples are the ancient castle in the desert in Tsui Hark's *The Butterfly Murders* (1979), the mythic backdrops of *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* (1983), and the southern Chinese settings of *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991). Other genres bring out different contributions from the art directors. The cinematic boom that we enjoyed in the 80s brought about a mini-revolution in which art directors contributed to the variety of styles and effects that were seen in Hong Kong cinema at the time.

In my private memory of best moments, I think the central sets of the "Dragon Inn" seen in King Hu's *Dragon Inn* (1968) and Tsui Hark's production of the remake in 1992 (directed by Raymond Lee) stand as emblems reflecting the changing schools of thoughts in film art directing. In King Hu's original, entry into the inn reveals a stairway going up to the second storey, giving an impression of a dragon flying into the heavens. The interior design reminds you of moods found in Chinese paintings, conveying at the same time a sharp division of good and evil characters in the narrative. As for the remake, the stairway is re-designed as a crooked, winding stairway, intimating the existence of secret passageways that may yet exist inside the inn. It also clearly symbolises the contradicting values existing in the chaotic period in which the story is set. Two different films were dealing with the same story in different eras of development, from which we can see the changing perceptions of the art directors -- so crucial to the success of their respective films.



King Hu's version of the "Dragon Inn".

**Keeto Lam** is a film critic who is also active in the film industry. He used to be an animator and is now a screenwriter, having contributed in the visual effects and screenwriting of many Tsui Hark productions. He is first and foremost a film fan.

## Interview Highlights

### Lo Ki-ping



#### **Creating the Giant Fish in Ten Brothers vs the Sea Monster (60):**

The fish creature was 30 feet in length. Our house in Shantung Road was too small to fit the creature, so we worked in an empty lot around the corner of the building. We divided the fish into three parts: the head, the body, and the tail. ...The fish creature was transported to Repulse Bay, and it took two days to assemble it. ...The belly of the fish was empty; we put in an outboard engine and that simulated the movements of the fish, and its tail would move like a kind of rudder. The whole thing cost three thousand dollars -- quite a huge sum at the time. It was made of wood, gunnysack, and artificial fabric. ...At the time, there were no art directors. Nobody designed the creature and it's wholly a work out of my own imagination. We got some inspiration too from foreign science-fiction movies, such as *Frankenstein*.

#### **On paper-bound props:**

The 'heavenly game leg' prop in *The Furious Buddha's Palm* (65) was my own design. From the knee to the sole of the foot, it was twelve feet long, and entirely manufactured with paper. ...The magic crane in *The Secret Book* (61) was manufactured with paper binding and steel wires. It was covered with gunnysack. We applied glue and put in feathers. ...I've also done skulls and bones with thicker paper binding. ...Those movable spiders in Cantonese pictures were my handiwork, wrapped with seal furs to make them look more downy. ...I lived in Guangzhou as a child and in the vicinity of my house was a shop selling paper-bound artifacts. I always stopped by the shop on my way to and from school, just to watch the craftsmen apply their skills in making those artifacts. My method differs from theirs. They used thin bamboo strips while I would use steel wires. The shapes too were different.



The "heavenly game leg" props in (1965).

### **On the props used in martial arts pictures:**

People would come to me to buy my flying darts which were made of antimony. I would usually prepare some dozens of them and put them away for sale. I also made glass bottles and wujia pi bottles from wax and sold them for five dollars per bottle. ...Before, in Tsimshatsui there was a shop selling imitation models. I noticed that the wooden model planes they sold were very good for making props because they were light. They were suitable for martial arts action pictures because they were easy to break.

**Lo Ki-ping** was born in 1910 in Shanghai, where he worked as a set designer on the stage. He began his career in the film industry in the 50s in Hong Kong's Cantonese cinema, working as set designer and props designer. Lo has created weird creatures, apes, giant birds and gimmick-like weapons for use in martial arts action pictures. He was also behind the hand-drawn special effects seen in some martial arts serials. He continued to manufacture props in the 70s and 80s, such as giant-size dolls, for use in pictures and television serials. He retired seven years ago.

### **Li Di**



### **On entering the industry:**

Li Hanxiang came to my shop looking for a jadeite screen that was ten feet tall and twenty feet wide. I made an imitation screen out of wax, and decorated it with images from the cave murals of Dunhuang. The screen was delivered to the Grandview studio in Diamond Hill. When the lights were thrown at it, the colour turned green and it looked very pretty as a backdrop for the actors; even the bosses didn't notice that it was fake. ...The value of a film prop doesn't lie in its money value. A real prop may not look as real when you see it on the screen. The important thing is that once you've filmed it, it has to appear real. ...What was difficult was not the imitation, but the idea of using wax to duplicate jadeite.

### **On researching the periods:**

One of the most difficult things in the use of props is to make them fit the period. The period backgrounds are different in each era: the Kuomintang era, the era of the warlords, the Qing Dynasty, the Communist regime. The guns used by the Kuomintang and the Communists were different. In the old days, wine cups were different in different eras; there were bronze cups, tin cups, jadeite cups. Nobody knows what kind of cups are used in what era. To achieve veracity, you would then have to research into books and catalogues.

**Li Di**, born in 1921 in Shanghai. He studied FineArts in Hangzhou and when he came to Hong Kong in 1950, he opened a calligraphy studio. In the 50s and 60s, Li made props for many Shaw Brothers productions, especially costumed 'palace chamber' movies. Among the directors Li has worked with are: Li Hanxiang, Yan Jun, Yue Feng, King Hu and Zhang Che. His most representative pictures include: *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (59), *Beyond the Great Wall* (64), *Dragon Inn* (68).

## Developing of Art Directing in Hong Kong Cinema

### - Interview with Mr Bill Lui

Collated by May Ng

#### *Editor's Note:*

*There have been little written about the development of the skills of art direction or production design in Hong Kong cinema. The lack of written discourse on the work of the art division applies from the early days of the studio system (when the title of "art director" did not even exist) to the contemporary cinema which acknowledge the credit of an art director; from the traditional joint tasks of the set designer, costume designer and property master to the increasing creativity of today's art director. To fill in this gap, the Hong Kong Film Arts Association is embarking on a new series of interviews with key personnel in art directing. This project also includes the publication of a 16-series set of VCDs that will record the history and role of art directing in Hong Kong cinema. Their undertaking corresponds to the theme of this newsletter issue, prompting us to interview the Chairman of the Hong Kong Film Arts Association, Mr Bill Lui, who is also the mastermind behind this project.*



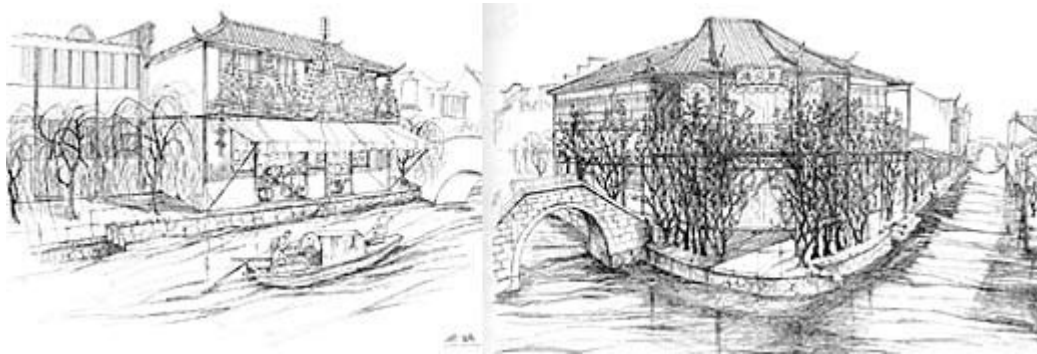
#### **Q: At what time in Hong Kong cinema did the art director make his appearance?**

Lui: In general, I would say it was during the time of the New Wave. Then, we had a lot of film students who had returned from overseas to work firstly in television. The advertising industry was also very competitive for talent. Several multi-national advertising agencies had set up in Hong Kong and they brought with them new ideas, and the concept of art direction was one of them. Many New Wave directors had worked in these advertising companies. When they began making their films, they also brought in the system of the art directing and it became an integral part of the filmmaking process. There is some controversy as to which is the first picture that had the credit of art director, but many inside the industry believe that it was Patrick Tam's *The Love Massacre* (81) with William Chang as the art director. It was the first picture that made people sit up

and take notice of the functions of the art director.

**Q: Before that, who was responsible for the tasks of the art director?**

Lui: In most cases, the director himself. But the actual design and execution was the job of the set designer. The Shaw Brothers Studio, for example, had its own sound studios and its own staff personnel for the sets and wardrobe. However, the others were not taking them as seriously and they didn't pay much heed to research. It wasn't until the heyday of the careers of Li Hanxiang and King Hu that the tasks of art direction took a turn for the better. Both directors had backgrounds in the fine arts, and their cinematic achievements were all the greater for that. A few of the first generation of art directors worked in Shaw Brothers as set designers and costume designers, such as Kong Quankai and Ho Kim-sing. Many of them have testified to the impact of the Japanese art directors who were brought in by Japanese director Inoue Umetsugu when he was employed by Shaws to make several musicals in the studio in the late 60s.



Design sketches of *Green Snake* (1993) drawn by Ho Kim-sing

**Q: How would you compare the pictures from the two periods -- one period without the credited art director and the other period with the acknowledged credit?**

Lui: The art director doesn't only execute the wishes of the director. He or she has to participate in the creative process and offer even more possibilities in order to give the director even more choices. Thus, the art director has the potential to lift the picture to even greater heights. It is my opinion that the functions of the art director should be, above all, to lead the actors into the drama. The costumes and the make-up are crucial elements in this process but so are the surroundings and the atmosphere. Apart from making the actor feel natural in his performance, the other function of the art director is to create a surrounding that makes the director feel comfortable to tell his story.



**Q: Is the art director taken seriously by Hong Kong cinema?**

Lui: Hong Kong films would normally employ an art director which shows that art directing is indeed taken seriously. But in terms of the production budget, the art department's allocation is minimal. There are very few pictures that would allot more than 10 to 15% of the budget for art directing. The majority of pictures allocate only about 5%, depending on the genre. With little money, you have to use your brains more.

**Q: What influence does the rise of digitised computer effects have on the job of the art director?**

Lui: It surely stimulates your creative juices more. However, I can't see where it's all going. Take an example: the scene where the swords fly from Adam Cheng's back in *Zu - Warriors from the Magic Mountain*. If we had used wires to draw the swords one by one, it wouldn't look as good as if they were animated by the computer. But the computer itself is rather limiting. If you use it a lot, would it not reduce your creative conceptions? It's too early to tell yet. Like the Hollywood pictures that have computer-generated effects. At first, they were really great but the more you see them, the more you feel that it all falls into a certain grid -- very artificial.

**Q: What are the different styles of the various art directors in Hong Kong cinema?**

Lui: Personally, I like the work of William Chang. Every one or two years, he would come up with something quite exceptional. For example, *Days of Being Wild* (90), *Chungking Express* (94), *Ashes of Time* (94), and *Fallen Angels* (95). Each picture has something different and this something different invariably relates to something from our daily lives. I am particularly fond of *Fallen Angels*. He made something simple into something quite extraordinary when you see it in a picture. He brought out the splendour of the lower depths in Kowloon. He didn't put in anything that was ostentatious, yet he convinced us of the substance of what we saw. He actually influenced the photographic styles that were seen in fashion magazines that came out after that film. This could have something to do with Christopher Doyle's cinematography as well. As for *Ashes of Time*, the whole picture looks very ashen indeed. The dense feeling is increased by the desert sands, and that unified the characters and the surroundings in an integral whole. This was very bold creative work. Apart from these examples, I have been much impressed by the work of Pan Lai (*Rouge*, 88; *Full Moon in New York*, 90; *Actress*, 92; *Red Rose, White Rose*, 94); the realism but also the alternative attempts of Yank Wong (*The Lunatics*, 86; *Painted Faces*, 88); and the graceful style of Yee Chung-man.



*Ashes of Time* (1994, Art Director: William Chang)

**Q: Have there been any outstanding sets that you have seen in Hong Kong pictures?**

Lui: On sets, I must mention the late Eddie Ma, who died two years ago. His sets are truly outstanding. He knew how to build them grand and his concepts were always good. Examples are the boulevards of *Project A* (82), the big sets seen in *Mr Canton and Lady Rose* (89), the Wu Dang palace of *The Bride with White Hair* (93), and the opera house of *The Phantom Lover* (95). In *The Bride with White Hair*, he utilised a lot of ideas for the set of the Wu Dang hall. He put in a huge statue of an ancest master that occupied a fourth of the space. If you look at it, it was disproportionate but he built it that huge in order to show how monolithic and conservative the whole Wu Dang camp had become. To make the statue even more grand, he took a leaf out of Greek-style architecture to make the upper torso of the statue more tight while the lower parts were wider so that when you look up, you have a sense of something grand.

**Q: Which of your works have you put the most effort into?**

Lui: I've worked hard on many of my credits. In *Green Snake* (93), I was to build the house of the white snake but the director wanted an illusionary structure that was conjured up by the magic of the white snake. He wanted a feeling of void and a set with minimal furnishings. I worked with another art director, Thomas Chong, and we built a set of chiffon-walls that was swept through with wind-scoop. This created an illusionary feeling. Behind the walls, I placed some bamboo, cherry trees and pine trees to cast shadows onto the walls. Once the set was lit up, there was a very special visual quality to that set.



White Snake's residentent *Green Snake* (1993)

**Bill Lui** studied Fine Arts in England. After graduation, he joined the BBC's Art Department. He returned to Hong Kong in the early 80s and became an art director in RTHK. He started his career in the film industry in 1988 when he joined the production of *Girls without Tomorrow* as art director. Other art directing credits include *Undeclared War* (90), *Green Snake* (93), *The Blade* (95), and *The Black Mask* (96). He is now Chairman of the Hong Kong Film Arts Association.

## New Acquisitions

### The Private Albums of Lee Sun-fung and Lee Yuet-ching



Director Lee Sun-fung and his wife Lee Yuet-ching had spent most of their lives creating movies. Though no longer with us, they have left behind a prolific and precious cultural legacy. Among the film classics directed by Lee Sun-fung are *The Earth* (54), *Cold Nights* (55), *The Orphan* (60) *Tragedy of a Poet King* (68). These film classics will live on through the ages.



Director Lee had behind a treasure trove of documentary materials, including working scripts, scribblings, newspaper cuttings, manuscripts, production planning notes, etc. Having the luck to screen through them today, one is even more convinced that Lee was indeed worthy of his fame. His private writings reveal him to be an artist fully devoted to his craft.

Lee Sun-fung's son Lee Sil-hung has long been in contact with the Film Archive. He has come to the recognition that his father's legacy is best preserved in the Film Archive, and to that effect, the Archive accepted the private collections of the late Lee Sun-fung in July. These materials will be of great benefit to scholars researching into the early history of the Cantonese cinema in Hong Kong.

## **Young Faces in Old Photos - Photo Albums from Wong Man-lei**



Following the death of Wong Man-lei last year, her friends have passed two of her private albums of photographs to the South China Film Industry Workers Union for safe-keeping. The albums include many rare photographs of the star in her youth. Because of the Film Archive's long-standing collaboration with the South China Film Industry Workers Union, both sides thought it was in the interest of everybody that the Archive acquired the albums. Hence, the Wong Man-lei albums are now part of the Archive's collections.

## **Yim Ho Donates his Silver Bear plus Other Awards**



Having accepted the generous donations of awards received by the stars Josephine Siao and Chow Yun-fat, the Film Archive has recently acquired yet another lot of film awards from director Yim Ho, including all those he received from international film festivals.

The most memorable of these awards is probably the Silver Bear awarded for best direction that Yim Ho won for *The Sun Has Ears* in the Berlin International Film Festival. The other awards include the Grand Prize awarded by the Tokyo International Film Festival to *The Day the Sun Turned Cold*; the Best Director Award given by the 27th Golden Horse Awards for Yim's direction of *Red Dust*; the Best Director Award for *Homecoming* presented by the 4th Hong Kong Film Awards; and the Silver Prize awarded to Yim's television drama *Wrongly Accused*, given by the 20th International Film and TV Festival of New York.

### Yonfan's Own Productions



Still of *Lost Romance* (1986) featuring Chow Yun-fat and Maggie Cheung

It was a coincidence really. Director Yonfan, who is also a famous photographer in his own right, had rung up to inquire about details of the Tong Tik-sang Retrospective organised by the Archive. During the conversation, the Archive had suggested that Yonfan donate prints of his films, to which the director quickly assented. On top of the prints, he had also donated the related publicity stills and posters. The prints include *Rose* (the classic version), *A Certain Romance* (1984), *Immortal Story* (1986), *Last Romance* (1988), *Promising Miss Bowie* (1990) and his most recent film *Bishonen!* (1998). Yonfan has not only donated the prints of some ten of his films, but also the negatives. Besides film copies, there are also film clips of Brigitte Lin's casting shots in her early days, a very generous gesture indeed.

In addition, Yonfan has also donated a giant black-and-white portrait of Brigitte Lin that he took over twenty years ago. Behind the portrait, the photographer penned the following words:

*This is my first portrait of Brigitte Lin that I took more than twenty years ago. The picture was processed in the year that it was shot. In the twenty years since I took the picture, I have moved house several times but I've never felt able to discard the portrait. In the mid-autumn festival of 1999, I have once again moved house. Knowing that the Film Archive is fond of this portrait, I hereby donate it as a lasting tribute to the beauty of a great star.*

*--- Yonfan, Mid-Autumn Festival, 1999*



Portrait of Brigitte Lin.

### **Tons of Treasures from Tsui Hark's Workshop**



*Shanghai Blues* (1984)

September 3 was a day of some excitement in the Film Archive. It was the day that cases of materials donated by Tsui Hark arrived in the office. What caused the excitement was the quantity and variety of materials received.

Early in April, we had organized an interview with director Tsui Hark in preparation of our Oral History Exhibition "The Making of Martial Arts Films -- As Told by Filmmakers and Stars." This was the catalyst of the eventual donation that Tsui would make to the Archive.



*The Magic Crane* (1993)

Apart from donating prints of *Shanghai Blues* (84), *The Banquet* (91), *The Wicked City* (92), *The Magic Crane* (93), Tsui also donated a steenbeck, many posters, handbills, stills, and original sound tracks.



There were about ten cases of the draft drawings, storyboards, production notes and scribbles of his animated *A Chinese Ghost Story*, Hong Kong's first computer-generated animation film that marks a milestone in Hong Kong's film history. The documentation and sketches denote the hard work of the film's artists and creators. What a pity it would have been if they were discarded.

### **RTHK Donates Copies of TV Productions**



Radio Television Hong Kong has just made public all ten episodes of its documentary series *Dream Factory* which explored recent hot topics related to the Hong Kong film industry. During the production of the series, RTHK had approached the Archive to borrow clips and resolve copyright issues of some film sources. Thus without much ado, the station decided to donate video copies of the series for preservation by the Archive and for the educational edification of



students and enthusiasts.

### **Family Collections from the Public**

Ms Lee Lai-mei has donated her father's collection of over a hundred handbills, film magazines, and soundtrack albums to the Archive. The collection includes many rare film brochures of the 50s. There are over a hundred issues of film magazines such as *Southern Screen*, *Grandview Pictorial*, *World Magazine*, *Great Wall Pictorial*, *Film Circle*, *Movie World*, *Feng Ying*, etc. Each issue was nicely preserved, and the collections are as good as new. Ms Lee's father, the late Mr Lee Chi-wing, was a policeman and an amateur collector. He had long loved the movies, photography, drama and the arts and for over forty years, had built up a collection of film magazines, film brochures, and soundtrack albums. He custom-built his own bed so as to store his collections beneath his bed and despite moving house a few times, this bed and the treasure lot underneath had accompanied him through. Ms Lee remembers how her father used to listen to his records on the gramophone. Though reluctant to part with the collection, Ms Lee thought the best solution was to donate it to the Film Archive because there was no more room in her house and selling it would not bring enormous benefits.

In addition, Mr Tong Fu-hung has also donated collection of film brochures of his father, Mr. Tong Yiu-koon, to the Archive. This collection will greatly help the Archive's ongoing effort in producing the coming volumes of the Hong Kong Filmography series, providing invaluable documentary sources for research. The Film Archive thanks all its donors for their generous donations.

## *Topping Out Ceremony of the Archive New Building*

Construction of the Hong Kong Film Archive permanent building is finally completed, a piece of good news long awaited by Hong Kong film lovers and researchers on Hong Kong cinema. Provisional Urban Councillors and Archive staff all gathered joyously on October 26 to celebrate the unveiling of the Topping Out Memorial Plaque.

The future Film Archive will be situated at 50 Lei King Road, Sai Wan Ho. The Building is a five-storey building covering a construction area of about 7,200 square metres, the construction cost amounting to some HK\$185 million. The Hong Kong Film Archive's main task is to preserve and research on the film heritage of Hong Kong. The new building is set to open in November next year. (Postscript: the Archive was finally opened in January, 2001). Once opened, regular thematic screenings, exhibitions, educational seminars and talks will be organised, accompanied by research and filmographic publications.



Officiating the Topping Out Ceremony were: Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Provisional Urban Council, Mr Leung Ding-bong (3rd right) and Mr Ip Kwok-chung (3rd left); Chairman of the Culture Select Committee of the Provisional Urban Council, Mr Pao Ping-wing (2nd right), Provisional Urban Councillor, Ms Wong Ying-kay (2nd left); Director of Urban Services, Mrs R Lau (1st left); and Director of Architectural Services, Mr S H Pau (1st right).

## Bai Guang - Light Undimmed

Tong Kim-hung



Many old veterans of the film industry have died as we face the dawn of a new millennium. It is sad that one of the grandest of our veteran stars, Bai Guang, has recently died in Malaysia.

Raised in Hebei Province, Bai Guang was born Shi Yongfen. She came from Mongolian stock and changed her name to Bai Guang when she became a performer during the most turbulent period of China's history. Her achievements since then constitute a glorious page in the history of Chinese cinema -- a glory that continues to shine even today. To one who has loved and admired her all this time, hearing the news of her death is a devastating blow!

Many people mistakenly believe that Bai Guang began her performing life during the war. In fact, she appeared in a movie called *The Road to Peace in East Asia* produced by Kawakita Nagamasa in the year of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on 7 July 1937. After this, she studied in Japan. With the outbreak of the Pacific War, Bai Guang went to Shanghai and there established her illustrious career. Bai Guang has made only about 30 films and recorded not more than 80 songs. She was far from being a prolific artist, but her fame has carried her through the ages and has transcended boundaries. She was known as a great singer, with a low, deep voice that emitted her natural grace and casual attitudes. Bai Guang's voice has been likened to the poppy flower, with addictive properties that ensnare the listener for life.



Bai Guang and Yim Chun in *Blood will Tell* (1949).

As for her talents as a screen star, Bai Guang was admired by legions of fans but she also won admiration from her peers. Her performance in the film *Back from the Brink* was said to have floored the greatest star of her generation, the singer Jing Ting. There was indeed no one quite like Bai Guang.

In 1953, Bai Guang was in Japan where she appeared in the film *Love of the Lantern* and sang the title theme song with lyrics written by the famous Japanese lyricist Saijou Hachigu. The song is now considered a rare and priceless collector's item. Returning to Hong Kong in 1955, Bai Guang made three more films and recorded several more songs before she disappeared from public view. She became a recluse, which increased her mystique among her fans. She kept herself from public view until two years ago when she re-appeared once more on stage to preside over an award-giving presentation. Although she looked fine, this re-appearance seemed to be her attempt to bid adieu to her legions of fans. Her exit from that stage was also her way of saying goodbye for the last time.

Her whole life may be summed up by the title of one of her songs, "Roaming Spirits of Old Dreams." The brilliant texts of that song also testify to her career. In her last years, I had the great fortune to meet her a few times. The last time we drank tea and talked about the old days. Though advanced in age, her eternal beauty shone through and I could only but gasp as I still caught glimpses of the old magic in her. How we sighed over lingering memories of our great stars as we talked about them: the naivete of Zhou Xuan, the exaggerating charm of Li Lihua.

What else can I say about Bai Guang? She is gone from our midst, and that touching, pathetic era that she represents has come to an end. To quote a line from the southern Tang Emperor, Li Yu: "Spring has gone as rivers flow and flowers drop, Be it Heaven or Earth!"

items and artifacts and is a valuable human resource in recalling the films and songs of the Mandarin cinema as it developed from the 30s to the 60s.