

Writer-Directors and Their Creative Space: Comparing the 50s and the 90s Looking Back at the 50s

The 50s was a period of prolific production numbers in the Hong Kong film industry but not a few classics of the social realist genre were produced by a group of serious filmmakers who bucked the trend of making films by-the-numbers. Looking back at these classics today, what kind of inspiration do they offer to contemporary filmmakers? This article examines the creative relationships of the screenwriter and the director by invoking the personal experiences of filmmakers who have worked as both screenwriters and directors. How did they set about to work creatively? Under the adverse conditions of the time, did they work passively or did they motivate themselves to create? We have included interview excerpts of veterans, whose careers span the 50s to the 70s, and quotes on their experiences and their thoughts on the 90s in the segment "On the 50s and Creative Work." The segment "On the 90s and Creative Work" allows contemporary filmmakers to expound on their creative processes in the Hong Kong cinema which began in the 80s.

We begin with quotes from Lee Chi-ngai, co-director of *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Father* (1993), the 90s remake of Chun Kim's *Intimate Partners* (1960).

"I saw Chun Kim's *Intimate Partners* when I was a boy. Its theme of friendship moved me deeply. The Cantonese cinema of the 50s was technically very far removed from the European and American cinemas, but yet I enjoyed the subject matter of Cantonese films, which praise family values and neighbourhood relationships. It all seems very old hat but they impart a sense of warmth. ...The story of *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Father* is taken mainly from *In the Face of Demolition* (1953). Peter Chan and I went to the home of Jacob Cheung for dinner one night. We talked until the deep of night and it was showing *In the Face of Demolition* on TV. Peter was struck after seeing it. At that time, *Back to the Future* series was a popular hit. Hence, we added in the element of time-bending and turned the film into a comedy. We factored in what was contemporary into the old society."

Interlocking Times -- On the 50s and Creative Work

Ng Wui

On working conditions In general, the companies put more emphasis on quick returns. Once the big boss loses money, he would not give you another chance. So we had to be cautious at every step. There were many problems to resolve.

On collective creativity (Directing The Union Film Enterprise Ltd's debut production) There were no bosses in the Union. We worked on the principle of "if you had money, you put in money, and if you had energy, you put in energy." At the initial meeting, it was decided that we made *Family* (1953), adapted from Ba Jin's novel. It was more convenient to adapt from a famous novel. ...We were in the habit of calling meetings to discuss the script, and ideas were thought out collectively and these were written down by the screenwriter.

On directing methods Today, if filmmakers wanted to fire a gun, they would do so; if they wanted to smash a car, they would do so as well. In our day, if we wanted to thrill the audience, we would have to build up the suspense with a lot of shots. You can call us slow and unfashionable.

Chun Kim

Cinematographer Law Kwun-hung on Chun Kim (In the 50s) Cantonese cinema consisted mainly of family melodramas with anti-feudalistic themes and the films were geared mainly to women who comprised most of the audience. Chun Kim tried to change the vogue for social issues. ...He always shot with a complete script, which he had mostly written himself. ...Usually he broke down the shots on the set. There was a saying at the time: "Was it well-fried?" meaning if there was an emotional climax. (Extracted from the 7th HKIFF retrospective catalogue.)

Chor Yuen

On working conditions and talent When I started out, I had been an assistant to Chun Kim and Ng Wui. Chun Kim was good at capturing the psychology of the young, while Ng Wui was a wizard. Ng Wui would film day and night. He only had a story and when he came on the set, he would write out each line, except for the most attended films like *Family*. He would give free rein to his talent and improvised right on the set. I wrote two scripts for him but he changed them completely.

On the art of writing-directing A film has a lot to do with the "ego" of the screenwriter and director, as in Derek Yee's *C'est la vie, mon cheri* (1993). ...I've always tried to keep up with the times. When De Sica and Rossellini were in critical vogue, I made *The Great Devotion* (1960). Each piece of material in that

film was based on newspaper materials that I had culled.

Chan Wan

On writing methods I once worked under Lee Sun-fung. ...A good script must firstly have a positive theme. Today, some go ahead and shoot objectionable material, and that disgusts me. Secondly, there must be an element of drama, otherwise you can't attract the audience. Thirdly, you need a good lead, a climax at the intermediary and a good ending... to impart a message to the audience as they leave the cinema.

On working conditions ...Later on, I wrote only when I got paid first. Why? Many scripts I wrote were made into films unbeknown to me. I am told by some screenwriters today that they don't receive the full amount.

Siu Sang

Embarking on scriptwriting It was tough in those days when I was working in script continuity. In copying scripts, you really had to exert strength otherwise there was no way you could write through four carbon copies. But you learn from adversity. The more I copied the scripts, the better I learned about writing them.

On drama Frankly speaking, those nonsense comedies only make you laugh a bit. When the audience leave the cinema, they hardly know anything about the plot. There isn't anything deep about some of today's films. Some will say that the old Cantonese films are bad, but everybody thinks that those films are flavoured with drama. Today, the emphasis is on fame, on gimmicks, on sex.

On working conditions Each film I have made isn't up to my ideal because there was not enough money to make them. Under such conditions, you could only do your best to complete your film.

Wong Tin-lam

On directing You learn from experience and what you see. They enrich your knowledge of making films. This is very important. I recently (in 1997) saw *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996). The cinematography wasn't all that good but the script was good. A director can't create behind closed doors. Success can't be achieved by what one man has thought up.

Biographical Notes



Ng Wui (1912-1996) became a director in 1941. Among his works are *Family* (1953) and *The Chauffeur was a Lady* (1965). He joined Rediffusion TV in the 70s as an actor and writer-director.



Chun Kim (1926-1969) began directing in 1948. Producing classics such as *Infancy* (1951), *Till the End of Time* (1966). He was a founder of the Guangyi Production Company.



Chor Yuen (1934 -) directed *Grass by the Lake* (1959), *Black Rose* (1965), *Cold Blade* (1970), *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972), etc. Of late, he has acted a lot on television.



Chan Wan (1921 -) launched his career as a screenwriter in the early 50s, his directing works include *The Pursuers* (1960), *Colourful Youth* (1966). In the 70s, he joined Rediffusion TV.



Siu Sang (1930 -) started as script continuity person in 1955. Among his directing credits are *Sacred Fire Decree of the Kung Fu World* (1965), *Famous Swordsman Tin Kiu* (1969). He joined TV in 1974.



Wong Tin-lam (1928 -) joined the film industry in 1947, and directed *The Flying Swordsman of Emei* (1950), and *All in the Family* (1959), etc. He joined TVB in 1973.

Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are extracted from interviews undertaken by the Archive.

Modern Day Attitudes -- On the 90s and Creative Work

Lee Chi-ngai

On cause and effect When I was happy making Tom, Dick and Hairy (1993), I didn't have any burdens and the script went smoothly. Because of its success, our next project was thought out tactically so as to preserve the same elements. When I made He Ain't Heavy, He's My Father, I was already a partner in UFO (United Filmmakers Organization). The success of Tom, Dick and Hairy drove me to create yet another success, so the script was written with calculations. Both Peter Chan and I feel that Tom, Dick and Hairy is a better film than He Ain't Heavy, He's My Father. But you can't discount the element of "configuration" in cinema. As the previous film was much praised, the later was even more successful at the box-office.

On writing and directing The choice between being a director or writer-director depends only on one's own orientation. One doesn't outweigh the other. I am not very fond of writing scripts, but I do want to tell my own stories. Other writers aren't to my liking so I do the job myself.

On his UFO experience I had a five-year spell in UFO. The most valuable thing I learned was the complete process of filmmaking and the whole industrial set-up: how to package, how to distribute and how to publicise -- the whole gamut of being a filmmaker. Nobody goes to see a film just because you've got a good script and director. In fact, packaging is a basic necessity. The famous directors of today are marketing geniuses themselves.

Fruit Chan

On the realistic shooting method I was much influenced by Johnny Mak. His methods of shooting were very socialistic and naturalistic. I felt very comfortable because the process was very free and it allowed me to communicate with "real" people. ...I like the name of "Little Cheung." It's very local, specific to the neighbourhood. Originally the script of Little Cheung (1999) didn't have the relationship between the grandma, the actor Brother Cheung and Uncle Hoi. But Uncle Hoi's story is a good one and so I included his real story into the script.

On creative space My orientation is individualistic and doesn't belong to the mainstream. I need the support of film festivals to preserve my exposure, and it affords me an alternative market. Now, many things have changed -- the environment, the market and values. My films need local phenomena. My future creative course will be very difficult. That's why I embarked on this trilogy to sustain my process.

Cheung Chi-sing

On directing and writing My own experience shows me that being a director is more comfortable than being a screenwriter. As a director, you are together with a group of people. It boosts your morale. Writing is a very lonely process and painful too. But I enjoy the process. It's easier to direct your own script. You feel more satisfied doing both. A director who knows how to write scripts is definitely an advantage. When you are shooting, there are many things that need changing. If you know the trade, then those changes will come easier.

On creative space Rather than seeking to work on big productions that might fail to produce what I really want, why don't I make small-scale productions that I am fond of? I am influenced by Allen Fong a lot. He said that creativity comes from daily life. In future, films will have a variety of distribution avenues: VCD, video, television, the internet, etc.

Biographical Notes



Lee Chi-ngai joined the film industry in 1984 as an art director. Among his credits as writer-director are *This Thing Called Love* (1991), *Tom, Dick and Hairy* (1993), *Lost and Found* (1996).



Fruit Chan (1959 -) worked as production assistant and assistant director in the 80s. His credits include *Made in Hong Kong* (1997), *The Longest Summer* (1998), *Little Cheung* (1999).



Cheung Chi-sing (1959 -) has worked as producer, writer, director, as well as dabbled in film criticism. Among his credits are *I've Got You, Babe* (1994), *I Wanna Be Your Man* (1994), and *Love and Sex Among the Ruins* (1996).

To Change or Not to Change -- Comparing the 90s and the 50s

The establishment of production companies like the 50th Year Motion Picture, Inc and The Union Film Enterprise Ltd in the 50s was an attempt to improve the state of the industry distorted by bad tendencies and practices. More demands were placed on the screenplay and a structure of collective creativity was set up. By the 80s, the Hong Kong film industry was experiencing a period of prosperity which facilitated favourable conditions for Hong Kong pictures to enter the international market. In the early 90s, Hong Kong cinema had descended into formula, and by the middle of the decade, the market for Hong Kong pictures went into decline. The downturn has forced many in the industry to adapt to changes in order to survive.

Individuals with different orientation will come up with entirely different approaches, irrespective of the time and eras. In cinema, an artist may prefer to work as a writer-director, but even such a hyphenated artist insists on the impact of collective creativity and the inspiration brought about by other individuals. The spirit of the collective has not changed. It is worth remembering this quote from Fruit Chan, "Very strange, people say I am nostalgic. I shoot on locations in Sham Shui Po, Cheung Sha Wan and Mong Kok. After I've shot on these locations, I can't believe that Hong Kong society remains the same. Some people live in a wooden shack, with tens of people squeezing in a tiny space... The society hasn't changed. What has changed is the stock market. The things in my films are still existing." The content of a film, the world of the cinema, and its creative spaces are very much intertwined with the social world. Society is reflected in film content. Some things never change. Lots of scripts are never made into movies or are even abandoned. The wheel of the industrial mechanism is still running as before, and the crew can still work in separate groups after the scenes were laid down.

The Hong Kong films of today, under present circumstances, emphasise entertainment. Values have changed. The complete script is a concept of the past, and today sometimes a script isn't even written. More important is that today's writer-directors know clearly their needs and directions. They know how to forge their own creative spaces and their own niches in the market. They are a more complete filmmaker relative to the 50s.

(Text: Kwok Ching-ling)

The Wan Brothers and the Cinema of Chinese Animation - A Tribute to Wan Laiming on the 100th Anniversary of his Birth (Part 2)

by Bao Jigui

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Wan Laiming, the father of Chinese animation films. Wan Laiming was the eldest of four Wan brothers. The elder two Laiming and Guchan were twins; the other two were Chaochen and Dihuan. Today, only Dihuan, the youngest of the Wan Brothers, is still alive and well at 95 years of age. In the 20th century, Wan Laiming led his brothers in pioneering and injecting new elements into the animated film in Chinese cinema.

China's First Animated Short, Tumult in the Studio The animation in China began with the animated cartoons. It was in 1926 when the Wan Brothers successfully produced China's first animated cartoon Tumult in the Studio. The Wans themselves undertook the tasks of writing, directing, drawing, photographing, processing, and projecting their animated motion picture. The success of Tumult in the Studio signified the birth of the animated film in the Chinese cinema.

Wan Laiming left his home in Nanjing in the spring of 1919. Alone, he went to Shanghai to work with the Commercial Press (Shanghai) Limited in the art and advertising department. Within two years, Laiming was joined by his three brothers in Shanghai. They joined the Mingxing Film Company, devoting their careers to fine arts department. At this time, the release in Shanghai of the Fleischer Brothers' cartoons (what the Chinese would term animated films), Popeye the Sailor, Betty Boop and Out of the Inkwell, were a source of inspiration to Laiming. For many years, Laiming had harboured the thought that "if only the mountains and rivers, the people in a painting could move." The Fleischer Brothers' cartoons proved to him that objects in a painting could really be animated. Laiming revealed his ideas to his brothers and they were immediately supportive. Hence, the Wan Brothers visited the cinema countless times to watch animated films. Then they would go home to discuss the secrets of what they saw, building a deep resolve in their hearts to create China's first animated film. Thus, an itinerary had been worked out.

The journey towards success is fraught with difficulties in the beginning, as the old proverb puts it, and this proved to be the experience of the Wan Brothers. To produce China's first animated film, the brothers had to overcome problems that they had never imagined before.

The first problem was the lack of resources. Laiming had written to experts from Europe and America asking for references in the art of animation, but more than

a year had passed and nothing was forthcoming. Hence, the brothers traversed the Bund in Shanghai and visited all the toy shops. They inspected a kind of toy that was in fashion at the time -- a revolving bamboo tube (suggesting the early camera model, the revolver photographique). The brothers went to the Great World Playground to look at the Praxinoscope. From watching these inventions, the brothers realised that in order to make drawn objects move, they had to employ the services rendered by film equipment and motion picture technology. Hence, the brothers took advantage of their employment at Mingxing Film Company to observe, inquire and get to know about film. Returning home at night, they would experiment by themselves. For four years, the Wan Brothers spent countless nights without sleep to experiment and finally grasped the essence of the "movement" in film, i.e. in order to capture movement, a person or thing had to be drawn or captured on film frame by frame, and when projected onto the screen one after another, a sense of continuous movement is produced. In this way, each drawn scene would become animated.

At the end of 1923, Shanghai's Commercial Press Limited Film Department learned that the Wan Brothers had mastered the technology of making animated motion picture and commissioned them to make a one minute commercial, Shu Chendong's Chinese Typewriter. This simple commercial became the foundation for the brothers' first animated short, Tumult in the Studio.

To raise money for Tumult in the Studio, the brothers knocked on the door of every possible investor in Shanghai's film industry. The brothers were rejected, but their faith was never shaken. Finally, after repeated negotiations with the Lianhua Film Company, the brothers were able to get the project off the ground but with certain conditions. Lianhua's boss had stipulated that the project would not overtly influence their work for the company (with the exception of elder brother Laiming, the rest were working for Lianhua at the time). The company would lend the brothers an old camera and nothing else. With Laiming in the lead, the brothers decided not to spend a penny on fish or meat for one year and not to make new clothes during new year. Thus, with the money saved, they bought an old still camera and personally refitted it as a projector.

The third problem was the lack of a shooting venue. Laiming converted his residence of seven square metres into a studio where the tasks of drawing, photographing, processing and projection were all undertaken. The bed itself would be used as a work table and the loft a projection room. Lacking a dark room, the brothers converted the kitchen into one by removing the coal burner, and sealing up the windows with cloth patches and trash paper.

Thus, by the end of 1925, working under these three big constraints, the Wan

Brothers went about their work in making China's first animated film. But difficulties commenced as production began. Thousands of drafts were drawn and it was difficult to make the characters move in the same position. Finally, they created a three-nailed stabiliser that regularised accurately the movements of the characters without losing the continuity of the locations -- a primitive device that is still used to this day in the making of animated films.

The most irksome task was to maintain a sense of perspective and distance. At the time, there was no such thing as a camera platform for the shooting of animated films, and this entailed another native invention involving all four brothers. Brother Number Four would operate the camera, while Brothers Number One and Two would hold up the drawn draftboards, and move one step at a time towards the camera. Number Three would manage the time by holding a stopwatch and controlling the movements. In order to economise on film, the brothers would rehearse their steps before every shot until everything could be coordinated. When recollecting this experience, Laiming said, "There were over nine thousand paintings and so you had to shoot over nine thousand times. For each shot, we had to rehearse several times. I don't know how many times we had to walk up and down in making this 12 minute animation film in our tiny loft doubled up as a studio."

After spending more than a year working at nights and on Sundays, the Wan Brothers finally completed *Tumult in the Studio* at the end of 1926. The film was shown to the public in early 1927 and immediately caused a sensation. Audiences made fun of the Wan Brothers, saying, "The paintings move in the film but the Wan Brothers who drew the paintings are too tired to move."

--- To be continued in next issue. The article will deal with *The Dance of the Camel* (1935), China's first sound animation and *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), China's first feature-length animation.

Wan Laiming (1900-1997). Real name Wan Jiabin. Born in Nanjing, the eldest of twin brothers (the younger named Guchan). Laiming cultivated a love for drawing since childhood and became a self-taught master in the art of animation. From the 20s to the 40s, Laiming worked for various companies in Shanghai: The Commercial Press, Lianhua, Mingxing and Hsin Hwa. In 1949, Laiming and Guchan came to Hong Kong to work in the art department of the Great Wall Film Studio. Laiming returned to Shanghai in 1954 and was employed by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio as director and consultant.

Bao Jigui is the officer of the editorial department of Shanghai's *Cartoon King Magazine*, a subsidiary of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio.

New Acquisitions

A Clutch of Patrick Tse Classics

On April 26th, we visited Patrick Tse Yin, the ever charismatic Cantonese movie star of the 60s and 70s, to do an interview for our Oral History Project. On our visit, Mr Tse not only gave us our interview, but also heartily agreed to sign a letter of authorisation giving the Archive the rights to permanently preserve any film from the Tse Brothers Film Company (Patrick Tse's own production company) that may come into the possession of the Archive. The films may be used for non-commercial and educational purposes including research and exhibition.

The Archive had actually come into possession of a clutch of movie titles in 1995, handed over by the now defunct Hong Kong Colour Movielab Limited of which the copyright owners could not be traced. These titles include seven of Tse's works, such as *If Tomorrow Comes* (1973), and *The Splendid Love in Winter* (1974). In 1999, the Archive also acquired a collection of films from the Great Star Theatre in the United States, among them several Tse's classics produced by Tse Brothers in the 60s. We have not been able to find any existing print of classics such as *Be My Love* (1968), and *Window* (1968) in Hong Kong. The Archive now has the rights, assented to by Mr Patrick Tse, to preserve these films.

Qiu Ping Donates Her Collection of Autographed Stars' Photographs Actress Qiu Ping began her acting career in the 40s. She was in Hong Kong acting for Shaw Brothers, *Great Wall* and *Fenghuang* respectively. Among her classic films are *Thunderstorm* (1961) and *Three Charming Smiles* (1964). Qiu Ping subsequently donated her collection of over 20 rare photographs to the Archive, including her own modelling photographs and personally autographed pictures of the great stars who numbered among her friends. The presence of the stars themselves in these precious photo collections makes these treasures all the more intimate and personal. The Archive will preserve these photographic treasures for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations who may seek to re-capture the glamour of the stars.

Old Shanghai Film Magazines and Hong Kong Film History

The Hong Kong Film Archive has recently received a collection of old Shanghai film magazines published in the 30s and 40s including *The Chin-Chin Screen*, the *United Photoplay Service (UPS) Yearbook*, *The Film Almanac*, and *Picture News*. When the collection finally arrived in the Archive, we were anxiously hoping to browse through these relics containing information of film companies, movie stars and films of the period. Leafing through the magazines, we find not only news of

the films produced by companies such as Lianhua (UPS), Yihua, Mingxing, Wenhua and other companies, but also news of the Hong Kong film industry at the time as well, such as the activities of Shanghai stars Butterfly Wu, Zhao Dan, Hu Ping and others, in the territory.

Of particular interest is *The Chin-Chin Screen*, which we have the issues published from 1934 to 1951, devoting its pages to news of Chinese film productions and the lifestyles of film stars. The magazine also published articles by directors such as Sun Yu, Cai Chusheng, etc. Its editor Yan Ciping fought hard to maintain the magazine's publication through the decades as the times and its politics changed amid the political upheavals from decade to decade. In certain periods, the magazine stopped publication only to resume after a while. It bears witness to the tumultuous times of Chinese history and today remains an invaluable tool towards understanding the careers of filmmakers who eventually came south to Hong Kong to continue their careers.

Art Director Donates Her Magazine Collection

Rebecca Lee, a celebrated traveller, had worked as an art director in the Hong Kong film industry. Among her credits are *The Spooky Bunch* (1980), *Eight Taels of Gold* (1989) and *Red Dust* (1990), etc. For her job as an art director, Lee had amassed a collection of old film magazines either given to her by friends or that she had herself sourced from old homes that were about to be demolished. For example, the costumes worn by actor Chin Han and actress Brigitte Lin in *Red Dust* were actually inspired by these old magazines. Recently, Lee decided to donate her collection to the Archive, including *Art Land* (published in the 30s and 40s), *Grandview Pictorial* (the launch issue), and the more contemporary *Screen and Stage Pictorial* (published in the 60s and 70s), as well as Run Run Shaw's *Screen Voice Pictorial* (launched in 1937 in Singapore). Now we know where these contemporary film workers draw their inspiration from.

The Archive is truly grateful to all the above donors and we extend our thanks to them.

Dead Knot Untied, After Thirty Years

One of the highlights of the recently held 24th Hong Kong International Film Festival was the showing of the short experimental film *Dead Knot* (1969), produced by John Woo from his own script, and featuring Woo himself as the lead actor. *Dead Knot* was directed by Sek Kei, the renowned film critic who was credited then as Wong Chi-keung (Sek Kei's real name). The presentation of this short film -- absent from the screen for some thirty years -- was highly commended by the media, the critics and industry insiders and was one of the most eagerly awaited events of the festival.

1969: A Time of Hot Blood

The late 60s was an era of scarce resources as far as hot-blooded prospective filmmakers were concerned. However, not lacking in creativity, young filmmakers were fond of taking turns in doing the jobs of directing, acting, or camerawork. *Dead Knot* runs 16 minutes and was shot in 16mm by a group of young film enthusiasts who worked during their spare time. John Woo had conceived a story about a male protagonist in the midst of a homosexual affair when his new girlfriend comes calling. Woo called on Sek Kei to direct the picture and spent half his month's salary on buying film and on processing. The villa in the film was the editorial office of the *Chinese Student Weekly*, the publication of the 60s that acted as the cradle of contemporary culture at the time. Sek Kei recounted those days in an article about the making of *Dead Knot*, "very strange, the recent independent shorts are not as sexually bold and even violent as those in our days."

2000: Restoration and Rebirth

It was about 1976 after the screening of *Dead Knot* in some youth centres that the film had seemingly vanished. In the early 80s, it was rediscovered by chance but unfortunately, the only copy was incomplete and worn. Several years ago, Ada Loke (wife of Sek Kei) had handed over the only extant copy to the Archive. The print had shrunk and its surface was scarred by scratches. The Archive was keen to save the film and restore it to its original glory, and in 1998, the Film Archive finally obtained support from the UCLA Film and Television Archive to restore the copy. Through their conservation team's hard work and efforts, *Dead Knot* was finally unveiled at the HKIFF in a new 35 mm copy duplicated from the original 16mm print. Though parts of the print appeared scratchy, the images are crisp and fresh. The film was shown in the Festival with a remixed soundtrack produced by Ada Loke who did the sound effects for the film's first screening.

Epilogue

The resurfacing of *Dead Knot* has aroused a lot of interest from overseas film festivals. This short film from the late 60s has become an important milestone in the history of the independent short film movement in Hong Kong, and an important resource in researching the career of director John Woo.

The Hong Kong Film Archive takes this opportunity to thank Mr John Woo, Mr Sek Kei, Ms Ada Loke and members of the UCLA Film and Television Archive for their help and efforts in restoring *Dead Knot*.