



## Chang Cheh and His Never-Ending Quest for Change

Director Chang Cheh (1924-2002) is almost a synonym with *yang gang* martial arts. We started to receive his manuscripts on *Memoirs* last year, at a rate of one article per week. To us, it was like a pilgrim's progress back to his martial arts world.

*Memoirs* comprises 'Remembrances', 'Shaws Times', 'Chang's Film Companies', 'On Directing', 'On Self and Others' and 'Back to the Origin'. Chang did not have a happy childhood and he never reminisced on it. It was the idea of reaching his twilight years that urged Chang to write it down, for the first time, in 'Remembrances'. He and Shaws have had a long and fruitful relationship, and when he established the Chang's Film Co and the Chang He Motion Picture Co, Ltd, he gave many budding stars their first break. 'On Directing' was full of bittersweet stories, many a time did he come back from the brink. His *yang gang* martial arts world was actually a world of trendsetting attempts: *Vengeance* (1970) was his first action piece set in the Early Republican period, *The Blood Brothers* (1973) first adopted the Qing dynasty setting and *Disciples of Shaolin* (1975) established the 'Kung-fu Kid' image on the screen. Opportunities seized or missed became more vivid with time and the benefit of hindsight. When going over the research materials on him and preparing the filmography, it is clear that his works are interlaced with achievements and shortcomings, which all the more confirmed his importance in the development of martial arts films in Hong Kong.

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*Chang Cheh: Memoirs and Criticism* (Chinese edition) is now on sale! In addition to Chang's memoirs, the 'Criticism' section is selected from film reviews the late director penned in the 1950s and 1960s, which reflected his cinematic perception and aspiration. It is further enriched with precious photos and a complete filmography. The price is HK\$100.

*Newsletter Cover*: The graceful white-garbed knight Jimmy Wang Yu in *The Golden Swallow* (1968).

## A Tribute to Chang Cheh

### The Opening



(Front row, from left) Cheung Tung-joe, Cheng Kang-yeh, Ti Lung, Wang Yue, Chin Siu-ho, Lawrence Wong; (Back row, from left) Chan Koon-tai, Leung Ting, Anthony Lau Wing, Mrs Chang Cheh, Ching Li, Chin Tsi-ang, Terry Lai, Lan Tianhong, Kenneth Tsang Kong and Chiao Chiao.



Guests attending the opening. (From left) Sek Kei, Lee Mer, Kuo Chui, Ching Li, Leung Ting, Chan Koon-tai, Law Kar (Programmer of HKFA) and Wong Hoi-shan.

Many film stars emblematic of the gallantry and heroic spirits of Chang Cheh's martial arts world attended the opening reception of *A Tribute to Chang Cheh* held on 31st October. The exhibition hall, transformed into an exposition of Chang's exquisite scrolls, manuscripts, and relics, was toured by Mrs Chang Cheh and illustrious stars such as Ti Lung, Ching Li, Anthony Lau Wing, Chan Koon-tai, Chiao Chiao, Chin Siu-ho, and Wang Yue reminiscing their relationship with the late director. The highlight of the evening was the shooting of a group photo which saw the stars assembled in front of Chang's 'Ode to Gallantry' calligraphy hand-written on red cloth. Here, we pay our tribute to Chang, who left us in June. ◆



(From left) Lo Tak-sing (Head, Film Programmes Office, LCSD), Chin Tsi-ang, Mrs Chang Cheh, Lawrence Wong,

Angela Tong (Acting Head of HKFA)



The exhibition 'A Tribute to Chang Cheh' accentuates the martial arts realm the director visualised and realised in many of his classics. Renowned art director Mr Bill Lui acts as the art consultant. Comics artist Mr Mark Tin-kit utilises the rich fusion of brush, fountain pen and computer drawing effects to present filmic images in their most original forms, while employing a wide range of techniques such as splash-ink, computer graphics and Chinese painting.

## **Chang Cheh's Revolution in Masculine Violence**

**Sek Kei**

Chang Cheh and King Hu were the two key advocates of the 'new school martial arts movement' in the Hong Kong cinema in the 1960s and 1970s. Though equally influential, the two directors differed in style and approaches. Hu was a meticulous, fastidious director while Chang was prone to sloppiness in a prolific career. However, Chang established the convention of masculine action and the supremacy of the male action star. It may be said that Chang was a rebellious revolutionary who broke through the old to establish the new in his preoccupation with masculine violence. Chang Cheh is Hong Kong cinema's Mao Zedong. His martial arts films fostered a cultural revolution in Chinese cinema, and more precisely, a revolution of a militaristic nature. It must be remembered that the Cultural Revolution in China was essentially a militaristic movement. In fact, Chang's first martial arts film, *Tiger Boy*, was released in 1966, the year when the Cultural Revolution began in China. Chang's *One-Armed Swordsman* was released in 1967 to critical acclaim at the time coinciding with the tumultuous riots in the territory influenced by the Mainland's Cultural Revolution. In retrospect, it may not be purely coincidental. Without the impact of the times, it is doubtful whether Chang would have achieved the same success in his 'military revolution'.

## **The Aesthetics of Individual Rebellion and Violence**

That Chang could begin his own militaristic revolution may be attributed to several factors. One may consider the China of Chang's youth, which was a country torn by strife, natural disaster and war, the vision of a young Chinese aspired to see his country strong, and the resonance of bloody resistance and violence through which the country may achieve strength - the source of Chang's eventual theory of *yang gang* or staunch masculinity. The basic principle of Chang's *yang gang* theory centres on transforming weakness into strength. Chang often pointed out that Chinese films in the 1950s and 1960s were too much focused on female stars and that male stars were rather oddly portrayed in a weaker light in comparison. Chinese movies should follow the footsteps of Western and Japanese movies where the focus was on masculine power and male heroism.



Chang Cheh (wearing shades) made a guest appearance in *The Angry Guest* (1972). John Chiang engages the Japanese gangsters in a heroic fight in honour of brotherhood.



Fellow disciples in chivalrous alliance in *Shaolin Temple* (1976). (From left) Wong Chung, Ti Lung, Anthony Lau Wing, Elliot Yueh Hua, John Chiang.

In fact, there were films in the 1950s and 1960s which did emphasise male heroic qualities, notably the Wong Fei-hung *kung fu* series. However, the portrayal of Wong Fei-hung by Kwan Tak-hing was largely an embodiment of Confucian paternalistic qualities, particularly the principles of benevolence, justice, morality, and respect for elders. Chang, on the other hand, stressed rebellion and non-conformity. His heroes acted out of personal motives, although they may do so for friendship or country. This kind of personalised heroism was rarely depicted in the Chinese cinema. Male heroes in King Hu's martial arts films were more orthodox heroes in the chivalric and loyal mode, be they knights-errant, treacherous eunuchs, or Taoist masters. Besides, it is well known that King Hu preferred to focus on female knights.

Chang stuck to *yang gang* to the bitter end. His heroes were models of male arrogance, pride and boldness. They were also violent to boot with no regards for the conservative Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist qualities of restraint, moderation

and humility that ruled Chinese behaviour for centuries. With the rise of Chang Cheh, Chinese cinema for the first time developed an aesthetics of violence. Historically, China has been torn of violence in the 20th century but in the arts, it was Chang Cheh who brought the aesthetics of violence to the fore.

### **Danse Macabre**

Chang's choreography of violence was of the hard school, focusing on the male body, blood and gore. Though the choreography of violence was often exaggerated, Chang's heroes were not the type who cannot be killed. If anything, the violence in Chang's films emphasises the mortality of his male heroes. Chang eschewed the fantastic or supernatural elements of traditional martial arts films. On the other hand, Hu's films played up such elements, beginning with the description of the fighting abilities exhibited by the human body. He then entered the level of metaphysics, the realm of traditional Chinese artists yearned for. Chang, however, adhered more to the realistic tradition of martial arts literature as characterised by the biographies of assassins in the *Records of the Historian*, and novels such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*. Naturally, Chang was also influenced by the sensationalist violence of Japanese and Western films, particularly Kurosawa and Gosya Hideo's samurai pictures.



The naked male body in full display. Alexander Fu Sheng (right) and Leung Ka-yan in *Marco Polo* (1975).

Chang's physicalisation of violence prompted the Hong Kong cinema's tradition of physical action films. Initially stressing the use of swords which modelled on the samurai sword and unarmed combat styles such as karate, the genre was modulated into an emphasis on *kung fu*. This later gave way to 'real *kung fu*' in the hands of Chinese filmmakers and players, such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Jet Li.

Chang's most substantial characteristic in his depiction of violence lies not so much in the choreography as in the celebration of the male body (on blood and flesh). His trademark was the naked male torso from the waist up, shown with bulging muscles. This splendid physical specimen is often subject to a regime of trials: torture, cuts,

dismemberments, death. Chang's emphasis on masochism and death is another sign of his breaking through the conservatism of Chinese cinema - of breaking down the taboos. On this score, very few Hong Kong directors have been as bold as Chang.



The exposition of Ti Lung's battered body in *Dead End* (1969) boldly exhibits Chang Cheh's aesthetics of violence.

The destiny of Chang's heroes is a tragic one. They kill and are themselves killed. Revisiting Chang's films today, the deepest impression one gets is that of a '*danse macabre*'. After receiving their invariably fatal wounds, Chang's heroes make a last-ditch effort to wipe out their enemies. This is Chang's most over-the-top, most implausible signature treatment of violence. It is also a part of his 'aesthetics of violence', which has remained a consistent trait of the director's personal style. Though Chang Cheh's emphasis on *yang gang* may be extreme, his depictions of personal faith and the hero's will to fight will probably last as his testament. (Translated by Stephen Teo) ●

Extracted from Sek Kei's Preface published in *Chang Cheh: Memoirs and Criticism* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002).

**Sek Kei** is a veteran Hong Kong critic and columnist for *Ming Pao*. His books include *Sek Kei's Collected Criticism* (in eight volumes).



## The Director and I

*Many an extinguished filmmaking talent was bred out of director Chang Cheh's stable. Below are excerpts from interviews with the actors and associates who had closely worked with the director.*



John Woo worked as Chang Cheh's assistant director on *The Boxer from Shantung* (1972), *The Blood Brothers* (1973), etc.

**John Woo:** Before I became a follower of Chang Cheh, I was rather shy and reserved. I even had something of an inferiority complex. Even though I had opinions or thoughts, I wouldn't dare express them. However, after watching a series of Chang's films, *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), *The Golden Swallow* (1968), *The Wandering Swordsman* (1970), and *Vengeance* (1970), I gained the feeling that I could possess the kind of youthful romanticism that was expressed in those films. He encouraged me to become a director at a time when I was at a loss and didn't know what to do about my future. At that time, it was an impossible dream for a young man to become a director. Even though we did not really speak a lot between us, he knew my potential. He set me on the right direction and helped me to establish self-confidence. I was very grateful to him because he not only sparked the dream in me to become a director, he also taught me the way of life. (Extracted from John Woo's Preface published in *Chang Cheh: Memoirs and Criticism*, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002)



When Chang shot his action sequences, he was always careful to accentuate the aesthetics of action... He loved to use slow motion. At the time, I thought slow motion was romantic and beautiful to look at, particularly when you were showing the action of a hero and the spirit of *xia* and *yi* as well as the spirit of self-sacrifice. Some directors are very meticulous in breaking down shots and so on, but Chang was more interested in realising his boldness of vision. Atmosphere and sentiments were more important. He has heavily influenced me in the expression of *xia yi* and heroic romanticism. (Extracted from RTHK's *Dream Factory Revisited*)



**Wu Ma:** I have always felt that Chang was nonchalant about two things in life: money and death. We have known each other for 40 years. I can't claim to understand his inner being but I think he was not a man easily prone to depression. Perhaps his life experience acted as a buffer against his setbacks. When he failed, he did not think of himself as a failure. (Extracted from RTHK's *Dream Factory Revisited*)

Wu Ma was a Chang Cheh disciple of long standing; he co-directed with Chang on *The Water Margin* (1972) and other films.



Ti Lung acted in many Chang Cheh movies, including *The Blood Brothers* where he gave his most outstanding performance for the director.

**Ti Lung:** He never scolded his actors, only his crew members - script continuity persons, line producers, or people who did not deliver what he wanted. He considered actors as people that needed to be stimulated or nourished. How did he stimulate us? He was not the kind to coach his actors but would raise suggestions at crucial moments, or add a word or two to clinch the point. Most of us actors are Cantonese and don't speak Mandarin all that well. On the set, we were required to speak

Mandarin and that would arouse a lot of mirth, but he didn't mind. Instead, he found somebody to dub my Mandarin speech and asked me to come along and observe how the dubbing was conducted. All thanks to him that I can speak fluent Mandarin NOW. (Extracted from RTHK's *Dream Factory Revisited*)

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When Chang Cheh was filming the trailer for his own  
Chang's Film Co, Chi Kuan-chun was asked to pose  
drawing a bow to shoot a long arrow.

**Chi Kuan-chun:** I was very reserved and felt too shy to speak to him. When we were shooting, I wanted to try out different expressions, but he would always say, 'Expression One will do'. And he was right. In fact, it'd come out more natural to use one's own emotions to act, just like Alexander Fu Sheng did. Even if you didn't perform well, he wouldn't scold you. If you were tired and still couldn't fight well after a lot of takes, he wouldn't care. He would go and take a nap... After our

working relationship ceased, I met him in my dreams, perhaps for a dozen times, on us working together on the set. Even though we didn't speak to each other much, we had a profound friendship. (Extracted from HKFA's 'Oral History Project', 4 September 2002)

(Translated by Stephen Teo)

Acknowledgements: Celestial Pictures Ltd, Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd, RTHK, John Woo, Wu Ma, Ti Lung, Chi Kuan-chun

## *Autumn Glory in a Small Town*

### **Pordenone Silent Film Festival, 2002**

Law Kar



Pordenone is a small town in Northeastern Italy. Though only an hour's drive from Venice, it does not share the city's importance on the tourist map. However, thanks to the Pordenone Silent Film Festival it has been hosting in the last twenty years, it has established itself as the Mecca of silent films where silent film lovers and researchers all over the world make their annual pilgrimage.

As Pordenone was already deep autumn in October, the writer and fellow overseas film lovers had to brave the daily morning chill when boarding the coach to Sacile, a small town twenty minutes's drive away. (The screening theatre in Pordenone had to undergo renovation and the screening venue has since shifted to nearby Sacile for the last three years.) We seized the travelling time for interchanges and discussions. The eight-day festival comprised topical screenings, complete with original live accompaniment, of hundreds of feature or short silent films. Apart from a cinema publication and CD-ROM/DVD fair and daily academic seminars, the festival is marked by follow-up publications of topical books and monographs to further promote its position as a permanent concourse for cinema experts, academics and film lovers over the world. The festival is the epicenter from which a huge multi-national web is woven. Visitors, after being smitten by their first attendance, have become frequent attendees and forged their friendship and correspondence with one another. Hence, Pordenone not only boasts the biggest silent film screening, it also serves as the connecting bridge and stronghold for the interchange and promotion of silent film culture over the world.

In its twenty odd years, thousands of silent films have been shown, and quite naturally, most of them were European and American productions. Still, in some of the years, there were topical screenings of Chinese, Japanese and Indian silent films, with corresponding publications. This year's topical screenings were just as

remarkable: 'Funny Ladies' was a selection of tens of silent films with the Funnies Ladies as the heroine, 'Swiss Film Archive Collection' made its debut overseas screening, and 'Italian Avant-Garde' focused on the country's early experimental works. Besides restored Eastern European and British works, there were also D.W. Griffith's short silent films made in 1912, which was part of an on-going project on the father of American cinema...

I would like to suggest that the Archive make it an annual practice of sending forth an attendee to the festival for 'Sight-seeing/film viewing'; it would not only be an enriching and eye-opening experience, but also an invaluable learning opportunity for colleagues in conservation, acquisition, and research. (Translated by Teri Chan) ◆

**Law Kar** is a veteran film researcher. He has been programming for the Hong Kong International Film Festival since 1991. Currently, he is the Programmer of the HKFA.

Isaac Leung

When first drafting a blueprint of our computer system and a database containing both film and bibliographical records, we have laid down two cardinal guidelines: first, the catalogue would use 'films' as its entry unit; and second, we would try to include 'every' cast and crew in each entry, matching each with their dramatis personae or positions.

### A Film-Based Database

A 'film-based database' sounds as obvious as 'book-based bibliography' and just as meaningless. However, a book is a tangible copy, and a film an intangible motion picture. Besides films, our database also comprises conventional bibliographical collections which are filed according to a very different cataloguing principle.

Library catalogues treat same titles from different publishers as individual entries. According to this logic, we should have eight entries for *The Way of the Dragon* (1972), each for its DVD, LD, VHS, VCD, poster, handbill and stills. Needless to say, identical entries make confusing retrieval, and the problem is further compounded by entries of similar titles. Hence, we opted for a film-based database in which items directly related to the film are grouped under the main entry. However, as some films are left unfinished and peripheral materials such as scripts, music score or records may be used in more than one films, they are catalogued independently. Hypertext links are also established to allow easy access and referencing.



Peripheral materials such as the original soundtrack, original novel and memoirs of actress Cheng Pei-pei can all be found under the *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* entry.

There has always been an overseas market for locally produced films. Overseas

acquisitions, which come in with alternate film titles, demand painstaking work to match them with their original titles. This is further aggravated by the fact that many titles were taken from familiar idioms, and it is not rare to have films with identical, or near identical titles. We established *Everybody's Happy* and *Honeymoon for Two* (1949) as one and the same record when we made a trace of the dramatis personae. This brings us back to our second guideline.

### **Covering 'Every' Cast and Crew**

Computer database has the advantage of unlimited space over printed filmographies. Lighting, sound, music score, editing and special effects personnel are no less vital to a film and some prominent second line actors cut a more interesting figure than some leads. These details are often useful in identifying films with different titles. One method we often resort to is to limit the search by identifying identical dramatis personae as collaborating proof.

Living family members of filmmakers often visit our resource centre to look for their 'roots'. Their ancestors might not have been big stars, but the root-searchers are just as proud knowing that their contributions to the films are recorded and recognised. In return, we are provided with further information, or have our mistakes corrected. Moreover, it is not unusual for stars to start out by playing supporting roles, or involving also in behind-the-camera work. By maintaining a full cast and crew record, it is easy to trace their route to success. Screen names, aliases, nicknames, shortened names (for instance, Li Caotin preferred Cao Tin to his full name), name changes (Faye Wong was Wong Ching-man in *Chungking Express*, 1994), and individuals who prefer different names for different hats (Wong Hok-sing was Wong Kam-yan when credited as a director) make the process much more difficult than it sounds. Typos in the original materials and identical names also contribute to our sorting difficulties.

If personalities give us a handful, then sorting out film companies doubly so. Film companies give us all the difficulties that personalities entail, and some more. The interrelationship between companies is much more complicated and entangled. Though already rich in content, our database is far from perfect. It is our sincere hope that the general public, our predecessors and film lovers would give us comments and corrections, and help us, in turn, to provide you with a better Hong Kong film database. (Translated by Teri Chan) ◆

**Isaac Leung** is the Systems Manager of the HKFA.



## New Acquisitions

### Revisiting Cantonese Films of the 1950s

Vivienne Chan

*From the Acquisition Team: Some 200 films of over 50 years old made their homecoming journey in May 2002 thanks to the meticulous care Mr Chan Kam-yuen and his family devoted to our film relics. To share their biggest passion in life with the like-minded, the family generously denoted their entire collection to the HKFA. Below is Mrs Vivienne Chan's reflection on the sentimental journey she embarked on half a century ago.*



The Chan's film vault

Cantonese movies from the 1950s came mainly in three genres - martial arts, dramas and operas. In whatever form, they shared the common purpose to instil and promote loyalty and filial piety. Filmmakers believed that moral teachings made wholesome individuals within close-knit communities which formed the nucleus of a nation. My late husband Mr Chan Kam-yuen was one of the few who shared the same vision. He made them, treasured them and kept them for almost half a century. While the storage environment was not ideal, many of them had survived intact. It was through the tireless scouting and arduous efforts of the Hong Kong Film Archive and its staff that made their moving to an excellent new home and storage facility possible. The films serve as a testament as to why these treasures took the shape and form they did and why youngsters of today should view them with less cynicism if they are to uncover the underlying messages. The late Mr Chan and his family extend their sincere thanks to all!

Cantonese movies of the 1950s are indeed inferior - in respects of the qualities of picture, sound and light. But one must bear in mind that these pictures were made in the time when most of the film producers worked with very little capital, tight budgets, sub-standard equipment, and often under undesirable environments. Mr

James Wong Howe, Hollywood's acclaimed Chinese-American photographer of that time, said at the end of one visit to one of those shabby sheds which made-do as studios: 'I must take my hat off to all these great people!'. Now after half a century, most of these pictures have become in their own right an important legacy of that era.

Young viewers loathed the 'noisy' operatic pictures because they did not know the theme of the stories, and were ignorant of the Cantonese music and lyrics. Little did they know that the majority of these films were adapted from popular legends and famous historical anecdotes. The music was compiled from traditional Cantonese music and popular ballads, and the lyrics drew from the works of literati of that era who dedicated almost their entire life to pen these great works. Some of the verses are so beautiful that *they* are worthy of accolades given them that 'every line is poetry'.

Young viewers will laugh at the martial arts film of the 1950s, and ridicule at the action sequences as amateurish, and child's play. They cannot help but notice the inferior *kung fu* art and the absence of special effects. But look at this against the backdrop of tight budgets, which forced the directors to be not only directing the acting but also the *kung fu* sequences. The absence of special effects was largely due to the eagle eye of the censorship board of Singapore of the 1950s. Even hand-drawn superimposed cartoon like the 'flying daggers' and 'thunder from the palms' or jumping up and down roofs to dramatise the fighting actions were banned. Why? They were considered 'misleading' and had a bad influence on the youth.

So audience, young and old, just remember to view these movies against the backdrop of the times when they were made and take time to unearth the treasures in each and every one of them. Happy viewing one and all. ●

### **Donors (8-10.2002)**

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Ms Monique Shiu

Ms Stella Yang

Ms Tso Kuei-fang

Ms Wu Shuk-wai

Thank You!

## China Film Archive Impressions

Mable Ho



China Film Archive

I made a short trip to Beijing in deep autumn, the purpose of which was to visit the China Film Archive. It was hope that personal contacts would facilitate a more thorough understanding between the two archives. The China Film Archive, set up in 1958 for a centralised conservation of the country's cinema records, is subordinated to the General Bureau of Radio, Film and Television. Incorporated with the Film Research Institute of the Academy of Culture & Arts of China in 1984, its functions are extended to the collection of Chinese and overseas films, cataloguing, conservation, research, publication, production, education and other screening activities. It has to be said that multi-functional and film-oriented institutions of this scale are hard to come by, even at national levels.

The China Film Archive has some 300 staff members and together, the Beijing Film Vault and the Xi'an Film Vault (located in the Eastern suburb of Beijing and the city of Xi'an respectively) boost a collection of 40,000 films. The Archive building itself houses the libraries of film documentation and graphics, reading rooms, exhibition halls and theatres in various sizes. In recent years, their collections have been undergoing digitisation and the construction of a website for Chinese films is underway. A hundred million dollars is earmarked for the upgrading of the two vaults to be executed in three or four years' time to ensure a more ideal environment for the permanent storage of the film collection.



The China Film Archive building houses the libraries of film documentation and graphics, exhibition halls, theatres, reading rooms and state-of-the-art facilities for restoration, copying, editing and subtitling.

Whether on the multi-functionality or the volume of the collection, our archive, admittedly, is not on par with our Beijing counterpart. So far as I can see, the China Film Archive is self-sufficient in the expertise and professional services required. To maintain a lean structure, we have to outsource part of our works and thus rely on a mature expertise market. All film producers in China are required to make legal deposits. The China Film Archive is now fighting to extend the law to film-related materials. It is highly unlikely that similar regulations would be implemented in Hong Kong. While their computer system provides access to information on the film collection, the retrieval of related materials has still to rely on the old index card system. It is clear that more works will have to be done in the areas of public access and user-friendliness. However, by entering into the WTO, China has joined the international club of cultural exchanges and progress and the Archive's contribution to the cinematic world would go leaps and bounds. ◆



Chen Jingliang, Director of the China Film Archive and Mable Ho

**Mable Ho** is the Acquisition Manager of the HKFA.

## Events

### The Opening of *Fong Yim-fun: Life and Work of a Female Cantonese Opera Artist*



*Fong Yim-fun: Life and Work of a Female Cantonese Opera Artist* organised by the Heritage Museum opened on 8 October. An accompanying film programme, *Fragrant Screen - The Exquisite Fong yim-fun*, is held at the Archive between October and Decemeber. ❖

### Seminar on *Fong Yim-fun's Stage and Screen Performance*



Fong Yim-fun



Mr Law Kar (right) and Mr Lai Kin conversing on Fong Yim-fun.

As a complement to the Archive's retrospective entitled *Fragrant Screen - The Exquisite Fong Yim-fun*, a seminar, entitled *Fong Yim-fun's Stage and Screen Performance*, was held on the 9th November 2002, presided over by the critic Lai

Kin and the Archive's programmer Law Kar. The two experts focused on Fong's achievements and her contributions to the world of performing arts and the cinema. Mr Lai presented a unique vision of Fong Yim-fun. He said that the actress never regarded acting as entertainment but rather saw it as a tool of education. On the stage, Fong saw acting as 'education from a high platform'. Thus, each role she played on the stage, as well as each film she made, contained educational significance. She was a pioneer of reform in Cantonese opera, seeking changes in the fields of costumes, script, and stage effects. She was also a very good singer - the reason why she became a big star of the screen in the 1950s. Although she possessed certain innate flaws which might inhibit her singing, she knew how to overcome them with technique. In fact, after WWII, there were only two actresses in Cantonese opera who established their own school of distinguished singing styles - Fong Yim-fun was one of them, the other was Hung Sin Nui. Fong held the view that acting must encompass three elements: the true, the good, and the beautiful. 'Beauty' means the ease of the handling of tunes, and the ability to absorb in one's emotion, which sums up Fong Yim-fun's merits as an artist.

Mr Lai Kin said that Fong deserved the accolade of 'the *Huadan* Queen' that was conferred on her in 1952. Not every star can be a queen of *huadan* (or a vivacious female role in opera). Fong's particular interpretation of *huadan* was the classical variety, based on the *qingyi* (or virtuous young woman role) who could endure all sorts of hardships with dignity and elegance: a benevolent and noble female who suffered first and enjoyed her rewards later. The roles that Fong played were invariably representative of traditional Chinese womanhood, adhering to the 'three subjections and four virtues'. In *Snow in June* (1959), Fong plays Dou E, who speaks of the essence of the 'three subjections'. Traditional female virtues and family ethics were firmly rooted in the stage and screen personae of Fong Yim-fun. Her classical *huadan* persona on stage tended to restrict Fong Yim-fun's stage performances, and her roles mirrored her person: dignified, graceful, poised, and virtuous. On the screen however, Fong's roles were more versatile and often let her person assume the characters she played. Apart from some classical roles, Fong also played the common people, famous courtesans, and lady of nobility, completely mastering the countenances and characteristics that each role demanded according to the story.

Mr Law Kar pointed out that Fong also played tragic roles on screen, which was a continuation of her image on stage. Although she was a famous opera star, Fong played mainly contemporary roles on the screen, or historical costume roles which were adapted from opera but were rid of opera elements. It wasn't until when she was about to retire that she made a few film adaptations of her famous opera pieces. This proved that Fong Yim-fun wanted to make the best of her film roles in their own



rights rather just repeating her stage successes.

Mr Law Kar also mentioned that Fong possessed consummate acting skills and did not go for exaggerated, grand gestures but rather emphasised truthfulness to express a variety of emotions. Fong's acting was subtle and life-like. She would not deliver one-dimensional or simplistic performances: on playing tragic characters, Fong was adept in using her smiles to counterpoint the tragedy of her characters. She would repress and then release her emotions, methodically expressing what the character was going through, revealing layers of emotions and rich characterisations. (Collated by Tong Ka-wai; translated by Stephen Teo) ●

## Seminars on Hong Kong Films and Popular Culture of the 50s and 60s

### Popular Comics and Films

In the seminar held on the 21st of September, comics researcher Mr Yeung Wai-bong took the audience not only on a trip back in time, but also striding over countries and cultures in a journey to explore the interaction between comics and the cinema. His account of the chronological development of Chinese comics, from the earliest *Mr Wang* to Hong Kong's very own *King of Blunders*, *Taipan Chow*, *Uncle Choi*, and 1970's icons *Old Master Q* (who recently made a comeback), and *13 Dot*, was also a lecture on the cinematic adaptation of comics: Mr Wang's inspiring attire of *cheongsam* and Chinese gown and box jacket was actually a result of trial and error; Ko Lo-chuen was not the only *Old Master Q* on screen; the screen adaptation of *Uncle Choi* was unfortunately a flop; and despite winning a frantic bidding war over the film right of *13 Dot*, Wu Sau-yee somehow never made it to the screen. Law Kar, however, remarked that *13 Dot's* presence was felt. The chic looks and attitudes of mod girl characters played by Josephine Siao and Chan Po-chu were largely modelled on Chow 13. Comics and the cinema set the vibrant trends of the 1970s.



Speaker Yeung Wai-bong (left) and Chair Law Kar

If the cinema borrowed from the comics, the compliment was returned. With his pigeon toes, the comic figure Old Master Ho, played by Lam Kwun-shan, was obviously modelled on Charlie the Tramp. In the 1960s, Japanese comic artists borrowed the agile framing and editing seen on the James Bond series, which in turn inspired their local counterparts. Comics have since taken on the look and feel of a film storyboard.

Yeung pointed out that comic adaptations were popular because they had a ready audience. The characters in the comics were familiar figures because the comics, serialised on newspapers and hence free, already enjoyed a large readership. Paradoxically, the social consciousness, the biting satire and the defiant spirit that made the comics popular were deemed too extreme for the screen audience, and were either avoided or much tuned down in their screen adaptations. (Translated by Teri Chan) ◆

### **Urban Literature and Popular Novels**

From the 1940s to the 1960s, there emerged a craze to adapt popular novels of all genres into films. In the seminar held on 28th September, chaired by Dr Mary Wong, the guest speakers gave an in-depth discussion on the relationship between novels and the cinema.



(From left) Prof Ng Ho of Baptist University, Dr Mary Wong and Prof Leung Ping-kwan of Lingnan University

A researcher of cinema and history, Prof Ng Ho was delighted to expatiate on the popular novels of that period. In around 1938 and 39, there was an influx of southbound writers from the mainland who created a bloom in local publications when novels of all genres, such as detective, adventure, espionage or romance, were in print. The *Tianguang Daily* of 1939 was packed with serial novels written by

renowned writers. Among them, *The Black Knight* by Mong Wan was adapted into film. *Hot-Tempered Leung* by Chow Pak-ping, which portrays the hard times during the Occupation, was so popular that it was adapted into film more than once after the War. Cinematic novels such as *Wong Ang, the Flying Heroine Bandit* were rich and ready materials for the screen.

Distinguished writer Leung Ping-kwan explicated the interaction and mutual influence between popular culture and the cinema. Take *Our Sister Hedy* (1957) for instance. The original by Cheng Wai was much more linear in development and melodramatic in plot. The screen adaptation by Tao Qin, on the other hand, was a sentimental comedy with song and dance numbers. The characters were enriched with internal conflicts and development. Cheng Wai even re-wrote her book based on the film. The same applies to Xu Su's *Sun, Moon and Star* (1961). He also pointed out that novels and films of the 1950s and 1960s could make interesting inter-textual comparisons. For instance, *The Tender Age* (1957) could be compared with Eileen Chang's *The First Cauldron of Incense* and those Cantonese films advocating communal spirit and integrity. ◆

### Customer Liaison Meeting



The first Customer Liaison Meeting was held on 7 September to hear from the public their ideas and opinion on HKFA programmes and public facilities. (From left) Programmer Ms Winnie Fu, Ms Monique Shiu of Resource Centre, and Venue Manager Mr Edward Wong. ◆