

# Foreword

- Grace Ng -

In the film *In the Face of Demolition* (1953), Uncle Tam (played by Wong Cho-shan)'s entire family is on the brink of being evicted by the landlady (Lee Yuet-ching) at a night with treacherous weather. Coming to the rescue, chauffeur Brother Wai (Ng Cho-fan) pays out of his own pocket and relieves his fellow tenants of distress. With the Tams immensely indebted and the other tenants moved by Wai's compassionate heroism, Wai simply replies: 'We all try to make a living out there. Sometimes you help me, sometimes I help you, what's the big deal? It's like they say, "all for one and one for all."'

Directed by Lee Tit and produced by The Union Film Enterprise Ltd (1952–1967), *In the Face of Demolition* has been hailed as a Cantonese film classic. Wai's line has also become one of the greatest quotes from Cantonese-speaking films; not only is it representative of the sentiments during the era, it is also the poignant ideal of this film's makers towards Cantonese cinema. Looking back on the studio's history of less than 20 years, it is fair to say that 'one for all' epitomises the Union Film Spirit. Not only is this motto exemplified in the 44 titles produced by Union Film, it also captures the aspirations of the studio's 21 shareholders for Cantonese film industry.

Union Film was established in the 1950s, and was jointly founded by famous actors Ng Cho-fan, Pak Yin, Cheung Wood-yau, Cheung Ying, Tsi Lo Lin, Lee Ching, Yung Siu-yi, Wong Man-lei, Mui Yee, Siu Yin Fei, Ma Si-tsang, Hung Sin Nui; directors Lee Sun-fung, Ng Wui, Chun Kim, Lee Tit, Wong Hang, Chu Kea; and producers Chan Man, Lau Fong and Chu Tsi-kwai. Run as a cooperative, the studio took filmmaking as a collective endeavour, pursuing excellence in both script and production while retaining realism and educational elements in its works.

During Hong Kong's post-war years, the economy was in poor shape with the thriving film industry being the glowing exception – over 1,500 titles were made during the 1950s. However, some of the works were of inferior quality and dubious morality. As a relevant response, a group of like-minded filmmakers formed a united front and launched the third 'Cantonese Film Clean-up Movement'.<sup>1</sup> Leading by example, they refused to partake in shoddy projects, as well as those spreading superstition or feudal ideology. It was against this backdrop of artistic integrity that the 21 veterans formed Union Film, striving for the production of quality Cantonese films. President Ng Cho-fan recalled: 'Union Film is established when we face an imminent crisis in Cantonese cinema. We wish to deserve the devotion and live up to the expectations of the audience. Driven by our artistic conscience and the desire to strengthen, if not enhance, Cantonese pictures' artistic quality, Union Film is created based on the concerted effort and encouraging support from the society and the audience.'<sup>2</sup>

To keep Cantonese cinema from deteriorating, Union shareholders not only refused to churn out inferior offerings, they spent their salary making quality works, sometimes to the point where no expenses were spared. In Wong Man-lei's autobiography, she recalled how the entire crew of *A Son is Born* (1953) bombarded director Chun Kim with criticisms upon the film's completion.<sup>3</sup> Chun, in all humility, accepted all the candid opinions without reservation. In the spirit of seeking excellence, *A Son is Born* took more than 20 additional working days for reshoots, long enough to make another movie. True to Wai's spirit of 'one for all', Union associates put their words into action for the sake of the industry and to elevate the quality of Cantonese pictures.

Union productions cover a myriad of topics: anti-feudal ideology shaped by the May Fourth Movement, such as the founding film *Family* (1953), together with *Spring* (1953) and *Autumn* (1954), the remaining two of Ba Jin's *Torrent Trilogy*; economic inequality in society and people's plight of struggling to survive, as in *In the Face of Demolition*, *Sworn Sisters* (1954), *Parents' Hearts* (1955) and *The More the Merrier* (1955); adaptations from literary classics and Chinese opera, including *Big Thunderstorm* (1954), *An Orphan's Tragedy* (1955), *Eternal Love* (1955) and *Anna* (1955) from Western literature, as well as *Romance at the Western Room* (1956), *A Beautiful Corpse Comes to Life* (1956) and *The Precious Lotus Lamp* (1956–1958, in three parts) based on Chinese opera; war-themed movies *Blood Money* (1957), *Road* (1959) and *Sea* (1963), probably inspired by the filmmakers' wartime experiences; and the studio's late-period genre pictures in response to changing market needs, namely *Adultery* (1958), *Murderer in Town* (1958), *Autumn Comes to Crape Myrtle Garden* (1958) and *The House of Murders* (1963), which all reaped considerable success.

As wide-ranging as the filmography may seem, the common theme is invariably centred on compassion and benevolence. By today's standards, Union productions may appear to be straining to educate rather than offer fair criticisms. They were nonetheless appropriate for their times, as virtues like kindness and magnanimity were treasured above all – as long as everyone contributed to the community by doing one's duties, it was good enough. From the Union perspective, films are of

an educational nature and possess social values – they are instrumental in education and not merely for profit-making. Though the 44 titles may differ in form and content, they all bear Wai's prevalent spirit of 'one for all' and the same lofty goal of putting forth their ideals and educating the public.

Looking back at Union Film's history, scholars Zhou Chengren and Yung Sai-shing pinpoint Ng Cho-fan as a pivotal figure among the Union shareholders. Zhou Chengren traces how the liaisons between Ng Cho-fan and the southbound progressive filmmakers influenced the future direction of Union productions. Yung Sai-shing relates in detail the little-known connections between Ng Cho-fan and Tong Tik-sang. The friendship forged not only results in subtle interactions between Union Film and the reformation of Cantonese opera during the 1950s, but serves as a representative profile of Hong Kong's cultural activities at the time.

Aside from elevating the quality of Cantonese cinema, Union Film also strived to be the torchbearer of the literary traditions from the May Fourth Movement. As a testament to this aspiration, the studio chose for its inaugural work the adaptation of Ba Jin's novel *Family*. Yu Siu-wah focuses on the film score of *Family* and describes the relationship between movies and local musicians during the 1950s, providing a glimpse of how Cantonese music applies to Cantonese films. Taking another perspective, Law Kar explores the later and less-discussed works of Union Film, highlighting the steadfast effort of the studio in adjusting to changing times while maintaining its mission. This unwavering spirit is truly to be revered – even as of today, we still speak fondly of the Union Film Spirit. Discerning the unique studio style and aesthetics of Union productions, Lo Wai-luk elucidates on these traits based on cinematic techniques as well as the acting skills of the Union actors, which defines the unique charm of the era.

Returning the attention to the films themselves, Tsui Cheong-ming, Po Fung, May Ng and Victor Or reflect on the vicissitudes of Union filmmakers in fulfilling their artistic goals. As many Union productions are based on Western literature, Kenny Ng remarks on the studio's achievements and compromises during the reformation of Cantonese cinema. Mary Wong sees within these cross-cultural adaptations some rare aspects of Union Film: the stories of how individuals face the changing times amid the emphasised collective spirit spearheaded by the studio.

Chun Kim may have been the youngest among the Union directors, yet he shone radiantly in the Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Company he established later. Grace Mak retraces his days in Union Film, when his works were characterised with an innate understanding of women and love. Filled with more modern chic than typical Union releases, his works already contained the urban atmosphere evident in future Kong Ngee productions. Wong Ain-ling deliberates on the lives and writings of two Union star actresses Pak Yin and Mui Yee, and gains a fine appreciation of their plentiful and multi-faceted acting skills. Though different in appearance and acting methods, both stars exude unforgettable charm on the silver screen.

The Union shareholders and productions have become an indispensable component of Hong Kong's cultural memory. Hong Kong people find Union Film so significant to the extent of interpreting the Union Film Spirit as the Hong Kong Spirit. By presenting a contrast between past and present, Chan Wan also pays tribute to the distinguished filmmakers from this generation.

Union Film stopped production in 1964 and officially went out of business in 1967. Though it may have lasted for barely more than ten years, the impact is profound. Critics often trace the tradition of realism in Hong Kong cinema back to Union productions. Aside from realism, Union Film dared to be different and explored the possibilities of various genres, to the point of producing opera pictures it had once held disdain for. Still, the studio had always been steadfast in injecting within its works a sense of genuine concern towards the common people and a faith in human goodness. The unique spirit of Union Film, in fact, has become a legacy as the immortal imprint of the era.

Translated by Richard Lee

### Notes

- 1 The first Cantonese Film Clean-up Movement was launched by the Hong Kong Overseas Chinese Education Committee in 1935. Its aims were to promote national spirits, encourage construction and infrastructure, popularise scientific knowledge and moral values, and to establish film as a medium to express human emotions and ideals. The second Clean-up Movement was launched in 1938 by Lo Ming-yau, Lai Man-wai, and Ho Ming-wah et al.
- 2 'Chuang Kan Ci' ('Inaugural Speech'), *The Union Pictorial*, No 1, Hong Kong: The Union Pictorial Publishers, September 1955 (in Chinese).
- 3 *TV Week*, No 314, Hong Kong: TV Enterprises Ltd, 8 November 1973, p 83 (in Chinese).