

# Foreword

The early 1980s marked a turning point in Hong Kong's development as the city entered a period of stability, emerging from the shadows of the social and economic turmoil of the 1960s and 70s. The film industry was struggling to find a foothold in the ever-shifting market. Hoping to capitalise on the recovery of the film industry—Lawrence Louey, Ng Siu-chan and Gordon Fung Ping-chung—three cinema circuit operators joined forces to recruit talented filmmakers to supply films for their newly inaugurated Golden Princess Amusement Co. Ltd. They invested in the three young founders of the modest Warriors Film Co.—Karl Maka, Dean Shek and Raymond Wong—to form the ambitious Cinema City Company Limited. The trio seized the opportunity to recruit formidable young talents such as Tsui Hark, Teddy Robin, Eric Tsang and Nansun Shi—together they would be known as the 'Team of Seven'. They adopted a producer-centric collaborative production model and a marketing strategy to establish a prestigious brand name. Within a year of their debut feature—a period comedy set in the early Republican era and shot locally in the New Territories, Cinema City quickly gained the trust of their investors and evolved into a production powerhouse. It was the first local company to hire professional stunt teams from Hollywood. Not only did Cinema City break box office records in Hong Kong with their 1982 production, *Aces Go Places*, their subsequent productions also dominated the box office in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, among other markets. Cinema City's creative output was an unprecedented phenomenon that would unlikely happen once more.

Unfortunately, Hong Kong is a forgetful city. The rapid urbanisation and economic development of the 1970s and 80s had not only dramatically transformed the cityscape, but also precipitated an alarming shift in our human values and cultural memories. 'Long live factory girls!'—the working class slogan from Cantonese cinema of the 1960s—was replaced by catchphrases such as 'New Territories oxen are just as hardworking' (a line from 1974's *Games Gamblers Play*) in the 1970s to appeal to the new class of white-collar workers. Even a 1980s iconic brand name like 'Cinema City' was not spared from obscurity. After they disbanded in the early 1990s, Maka and Shek gradually withdrew from the industry. Wong continued to produce films and successfully established his own brand. Despite their phenomenal success, 'Cinema City' was a topic that researchers and film historians rarely chose to tackle. The lack of attention paid to Cinema City is disproportional to its massive success and popularity.

Based on a collection of stories shared by filmmakers, this research project is an attempt to document the experiences of these important filmmakers. The objective here is not to 'lionise' but rather to offer source material for researchers to gain insight into the spirit behind Cinema City and their prolific output. Through first person accounts from the filmmakers, we wish to chronicle their goals and struggles. For researchers who are interested in film and cultural history, and the younger generation who are eager to learn from the past alike, it will serve as a valuable reference.

The Hong Kong Film Archive is honoured to have the support and opportunity to interview Mr Gordon Fung Ping-chung of Golden Princess Circuit. His participation provided us with information crucial to our understanding of Cinema City's establishment and its operation. We also had the privilege of interviewing the three founders of Cinema City—Mr Karl Maka, Mr Dean Shek and Mr Raymond Wong—who generously shared the details behind the founding of their company, how they built their creative team and company framework, established their guiding principles and the creative process behind their string of record-breaking blockbusters. They even delved into some of the motivations and reflections behind their eventual split. We are thankful for their participation.

Under the three bosses, the Team of Seven was formed to serve as the company's central production command unit. Two core members of the team, Ms Nansun Shi and Mr Teddy Robin, shared details on how they joined the company. Shi took on administration and overseas marketing roles while Teddy Robin was responsible for a host of creative tasks—from developing story ideas to directing, producing and acting. His recollections of the film scoring process were especially fascinating—how he overcame mission impossible within a tight time frame and yet managed to create innovative and playful works. These stories reflect the absolute dedication of the participants back then.

To solidify its position, Cinema City spared no efforts in recruiting talents, such as Sylvia Chang from Taiwan. Chang recounted how she was cast in *Aces Go Places* and also discussed her experiences during her year-long tenure as the production director of the

company's Taiwanese branch, shedding light on the company's overseas development—a lesser known chapter of Cinema City's story. Editor Tony Chow Kwok-chung, who was there at the company from alpha to omega, shared behind-the-scenes details of production, from editing awarding-winning works to setting up the in-house recording studio. Before making his name with the *On Fire* series, Ringo Lam directed a string of genre-bending comedies for Cinema City, which was a critical period of development for him.

Other former staff members of Cinema City were also invited to share their accounts of the period. They include production manager and associate producer Wellington Fung, director of marketing Edward Li, special effects artist Yiu Yau-hung, editor and score composer David Wu, and poster illustrator Yuen Tai-yung. Along with the oral history interviews with directors Tsui Hark and John Woo, they have provided a trove of fascinating perspectives in our understanding of Cinema City. Due to constraints regarding the length of this volume, we are not able to publish the many of the details. But excerpts can be found in the articles in this volume.

We are also grateful to the many interviewees for lending us precious photographs from that period. The colour of these photos may have faded, but their spirit of youth and resilience remains as vivid as ever. The photos taken at the celebration of Cinema City's second anniversary, for instance, capture the jubilation of everyone basking in the company's glory. Each frame of memories serves as a witness to the creative energy and luster of a significant era in 20th century Hong Kong cinema. We would like to express our gratitude to Fortune Star Media Limited for generously granting us the rights to reproduce numerous photographs and artwork, and to all individuals who loaned us their personal photos. Last but not least, we would like to thank all contributing writers for their research on Cinema City and their reflections on this colourful chapter of film history. [Translated by Sandy Ng]

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**Editors**