

## Foreword

By 1966, the Chaozhou-dialect film industry in Hong Kong had come to a standstill. Actress Chan Chor-wai, dubbed the ‘Prince Charming’ of Chaozhou opera who headlined over 60 films in seven years, followed the Xin Tian Cai Chaozhou Opera Troupe on her first tour to Thailand. To her utter amazement, what awaited her at the airport was a tumultuous welcome given by thousands of her ardent fans. Amidst the thunderous applause in all her sold-out performances that followed, the star eventually decided to extend her stay from one month to several. Looking back, this Chan Chor-wai craze in Thailand didn’t pale in comparison with the stir caused by the Beatles when they first visited Hong Kong in 1964.

50 years after Chan Chor-wai graced the Chaozhou film screen, the divo passed away in Hong Kong in 2012. A crowd of her loyal fans, many clad in green – the favourite colour of their idol – flew in from all over Southeast Asia to pay their final tribute at the funeral. As it happened, the death of this superstar, who is still holding sway over Southeast Asia to this very day, went almost unnoticed here – not even one local paper bothered reporting the news.

Badly loved abroad but coldly treated at home – the personal experience of Chan Chor-wai encapsulates, to a large extent, the fate of the entire Chaozhou-dialect film industry. The vast majority of the 160-plus film titles we have found today were made in Hong Kong in the 1960s, inarguably a result of the special temporal and spatial circumstances of the day. For the Chaozhou emigrants in Southeast Asia, most notably Singapore, Malaya and Thailand, movies made in their native language were not only a major form of entertainment but a means of emotional relief. This slice of cultural heritage, prodigious as it is, failed to get even the slightest bit of attention in Hong Kong at the time – and now only more so.

*The Chaozhou-dialect Films of Hong Kong* is an attempt to find out more about this unturned page of history. Throughout the decades, little study has been made of this regional cinema. Even though we have invited not a few specialists and scholars to contribute to this monograph, we were all exploring a past that had remained largely unknown. This made our work more difficult, and yet precisely because of all the unknowns, this project brought us more discoveries than ever. Above all, we managed to get in touch with many film veterans who were once part and parcel of this distinctive cinema. Their recollections offered us an insider’s view of the industry that had not been documented before. Apart from the oral history interviews published in this volume, researcher May Ng, also editor of this book, had talked to some other seasoned actors, namely Fong Hon-chong, Lee Mei-ying and Chow Lok. The knowledge they imparted to us is now collected in the various sections of this

monograph, including the essays, filmmakers' biographies and the filmography.

This project on Chaozhou-dialect cinema was timely, in that we were able to talk with Chan Chor-wai and Chan Man-cheong shortly before their passing. If we started half a year later, we would have missed these two interviews which are vitally important. That said, the project was untimely nonetheless, in that producer Wu Yuanxiang and famed actress Chong Suet-kuen – the equal of Chan Chor-wai, both performing young male roles to critical acclaim – had departed in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Had we started earlier, their life stories as told by themselves would have deepened our understanding of this subject for sure. The issue of timing, alongside all the unknowns, is perhaps a constant in the work of a researcher.

**Po Fung**  
**Research Officer, Hong Kong Film Archive**

(Translated by Elbe Lau)