

## Preface

Shown in February 1997, *Once Upon a Time in China and America* is by far the last Wong Fei-hung movie in Hong Kong. No sign of the kung fu master's return to the big screen since, thus creating a 15-year hiatus – the longest ever in the history of the Wong Fei-hung film series.

Starting from *The Story of Wong Fei-hung, Part One* in 1949, Wong Fei-hung movies had been produced almost endlessly across different generations. The practice came to a pause after *Martial Club* in 1981 but was revived by *Once Upon a Time in China* ten years later. Despite the current hiatus, Wong Fei-hung still remains one of the most memorable movie characters of Hong Kong. He is continuously featured in television dramas, and a wealth of Wong Fei-hung movies over the years, many of which considered the masterpieces of Hong Kong cinema, contributes to the making of a cultural icon in his own right.

The legacy of more than 100 Wong Fei-hung movies dated back to 1949, when *The Story of Wong Fei-hung* was first made. By 1961, with *Wong Fei-hung Smashes the Five Tigers*, some 60 films about Wong Fei-hung marked the first phase of the film series. Almost all of them featured actor Kwan Tak-hing as Master Wong and were directed by Wu Pang. By the late 1960s, 11 more films were added to the count; nine of them were directed by Wong Fung and by coincidence, screenwriter Szeto On also penned nine of the scripts. Taking on the craze of kung fu cinema, film studios Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest started to produce their own Wong Fei-hung movies, and subsequently, spin-offs about his early life. Yet another climax was created by director Tsui Hark in the early 1990s, soon dying down however by 1997. Most of the Wong Fei-hung movies since 1960s are well kept in

discs or tapes, even though some of the original film prints are either lost or damaged. For the works much earlier on during the 1950s, however, only some 30 films, amount to just half of the collection, are preserved.

Among the lost works, the most important one is believed to be *Wong Fei-hung's Rival for the Fireworks in Huadi* (1955), a blockbuster at that time and so popular that it was succeeded by as many as 27 Wong Fei-hung movies in the following year. It is likely that the tune 'Ode to the General' ('Jiangjun Ling') was first used in this movie, where the character Bucktooth So also appeared for the first time. Unfortunately, this could never be verified, as no print is available for viewing today. Another significant loss is *Wong Fei-hung on Rainbow Bridge* (1959), the first Wong Fei-hung movie in colour. Director Wu Pang recalled he made an all-out effort in this self-funded film of his but it flopped badly at the box office.

To name some of the important works in the present preserved collection, *The Story of Wong Fei-hung* (in four parts, 1949–1950) allows us a rare chance to look at the kung fu master in a different light, a reckless hero before he was famed and stereotyped. An incomplete copy of *The Story of Wong Fei-hung, Grand Conclusion* (1951) is kept in the Hong Kong Film Archive, with footage of Lam Sai-wing first joining Wong to become his disciple. The one who played Lam Sai-wing was not the usual cast Lau Cham, but Chan Hon-chung, a grand-disciple of Wong. Lau Cham first appeared as Lam Sai-wing in *The Story of Wong Fei-hung and Lam Sai-wing* (1954). The film was long considered lost but it was recently revealed that the Television Broadcasts Limited had been keeping a copy all along. Thanks to their generosity, the copy was donated to the Film Archive in 2011 together with some 1,000 film titles. Our thanks are also due to Kong Chiao Film Company and Lui Ming (International) Film Enterprises for their consent to the donation.

The archives are valuable resources in outlining the different features of Wong Fei-hung movies from their various characters and backgrounds. One of the important images of Wong Fei-hung is his being an eminent kung fu teacher, a 'sifu'. In this book, veteran educator Lo Wai-luen writes about Wong's teaching philosophy. Another essay by Dr Wong Chung-ming elucidates how the stories of Wong Fei-hung came to life against the background of the growing Lingnan *wuxia* fictions from Guangzhou. Dr Wong's research is exploratory in providing the film series with a cultural context. Researcher May Ng draws reference from the Cantonese opera techniques and aesthetics that Kwan Tak-hing employed to discuss how the actor gave birth to a vivid portrayal of his character. Master Wong's bitter rival, 'Villain Kin' is as iconic as the hero, and so is his impersonator Sek Kin who often played against Kwan Tak-hing on screen. Film critic Longtin gives us an interesting reading of how gallantry, the idea of *xia*, was also built around the character of 'Villain Kin'.

Situated at different times, all Wong Fei-hung movies are uniquely placed. Researcher Lau Yam gives an analysis on the strongly cinematic Wong Fei-hung pictures in the 1960s, and how different production teams contributed to diverse portrayals of Master Wong. Film critic Matthew Cheng focuses

on the 1970s, when both the movie series and Hong Kong experienced significant transformations. Despite its usual fictional take, the movie series was tightly entwined with Hong Kong's changing social landscape during this period.

The booming television industry in the 1970s also saw Master Wong appearing in television drama for the first time in 1976. It was where the final phase of the Kwan Tak-hing era started. Yet another distinct portrayal of Master Wong could be seen in *Wong Fei-hung* (1976), a 13-episode television drama. Film critic Ka Ming observes that it was television drama which first took a historical reading to the story of Wong Fei-hung, an approach quite different from seeing it as just folklore, and possibly a reference for Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China*.

Besides examining the works across time, analyses of some of the major elements in the movies also open up new insights into Wong Fei-hung's cinema. 'Ode to the General' is so iconic that it is long considered as one of the signature pieces of Guangdong music. Professor Yu Siu-wah traces the origin of the tune and also looks at the traditional Guangdong music used in the movies, such as *lungchow* and *ban-ngan*. Wong Chi-fai offers a locality study of the movies by comparing them with some of the recent action hero pictures, such as *Ip Man* (2008). The school of Hung Fist, under which Wong Fei-hung studied, received different treatment in the film series. Wong Fei-hung's successor Sifu Lee Chan-wo, as well as Sifus Lau Ka-yung and Pang Chi-ming, are invited to discuss the works that demonstrated the real Hung Fist.

The 'father' of Wong Fei-hung is in fact novelist Chu Yu-chai, who received credit in most of the Wong Fei-hung movies from the 1950s as the original author (although the movies were not adapted directly from his works). Chu played a vital role in giving birth to the Wong Fei-hung movies but information about him is scarce. A brief account of his life and a collection of his writings shed light on the making of the film icon.

During the research of the movies, we came to realise that Wong Fei-hung is not a movie character living within his own cinematic world. He is in fact weaved into a narrative built around a group of different figures who shared equally dramatic charm. One example is the way Beggar So from Wong Fei-hung movies became the protagonist of *Heroes among Heroes* (1993) and *True Legend* (2010) by Yuen Woo-ping. As seen in some of the recent kung fu dramas such as *Ip Man*, the impact of Wong Fei-hung is still felt by Hong Kong cinema despite the long hiatus that the film series is currently taking.

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