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# **Hong Kong Film Archive**

## ***e-Newsletter 63***

### **More English translation**

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## Research

### Golden Harvest and the Generational Change in 1970s Hong Kong Cinema

Po Fung

The 1970s were a period of pivotal transitions in Hong Kong cinema. It was also the era of Golden Harvest, from its birth to becoming the main pillar of the film industry. In changing times, Golden Harvest had the flexibility to move with the times, but on the other hand its success came from it spearheading much of the change. Looking at the changes in the company itself, one can see some of significant movements in Hong Kong cinema back then.

#### A New Crop of Homegrown Directors

Founded in 1970, Golden Harvest released its debut production *The Invincible Eight* in 1971. Before *The Big Boss* hit the screens on 31 October, 1971, Golden Harvest's productions and distributions include Lo Wei's *The Invincible Eight*; *Zatoichi and the One-Armed Swordsman*, co-directed by Hsu Tseng-hung and Yasuda Kimiyoshi; Hsu Tseng-hung's *The Last Duel*, Yip Wing-cho's *The Blade Spares None*; Huang Feng's *The Angry River* and *The Fast Sword*; Lo Wei's *The Comet Strikes*; Wong Tin-lam's *The Chase*; Hsu Tseng-hung's *The Invincible Sword* and Law Chi's *Thunderbolt*.<sup>1</sup> On genre, these were all martial arts, or *wuxia* films from the 'new *wuxia* era' trend driven by the Shaw Brothers. *Zatoichi* was even a Shaw blockbuster. In terms of directors, Lo Wei, Huang Feng, Hsu Tseng-hung and Yip Wing-cho (Lo Wei's longtime deputy) all left Shaws with Raymond Chow to work for Golden Harvest. There was also Wong Tin-lam, a director from Cathay Organisation and Law Chi, who was directing films for First Film Co in Taiwan at the time. From genre to talent, it's clear that the beginning of Golden Harvest had a heavy taste of a Shaw legacy.

These directors all shared a special trait, that is, apart from Law Chi, all of them were northerners who moved to Hong Kong after the war – the first generation of postwar, southbound filmmakers. (Yip Wing-cho may be considered second generation, but in fact he was already assistant director by 1966). Of them, Lo Wei, whose films were especially popular, and Huang Feng became the twin pillars of early Golden Harvest days, filming more than anyone else. Later, Zhu Mu, who shared a similar background, also made several films for Golden Harvest that were well received, such as *Supremo* (1974) and *All in the Family* (1975). These postwar, southbound filmmakers are seen as the directorial backbone of early Golden Harvest.

But a decade later, none of these directors remained. Lo Wei left Golden Harvest early in 1974; Huang Feng left later, after his last film for the company, *The Shaolin*

*Plot* (1977). Zhu Mu's swansong at Golden Harvest was *The Ladykiller*, also 1977. All the rest had stopped making movies for the company long ago. From 1974, the key directors for Golden Harvest became Michael Hui, John Woo, Sammo Hung and, later, Jackie Chan. Richard Ng, as an actor, also had certain influence. These filmmakers, much younger than the first-generation directors, were all raised locally in Hong Kong after the war. Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan had a northern background, but having spent their childhood in Hong Kong, they were very much so locals. Suddenly, Golden Harvest had a completely transformed background of its creative mainstay. This transformation can be traced back to Bruce Lee, whose appearance blew new life into Golden Harvest films for the first time. With his self-written, produced and directed *Way of the Dragon*, which he also starred in, he proved that the new-generation filmmakers could bring fresh dynamics to the game. After his sudden death, Golden Harvest managed to get Michael Hui, whose *Games Gamblers Play* influenced Hong Kong comedy almost as much as Bruce Lee's impact on kung fu film. In the year Lo Wei left, John Woo joined and replaced Lo's solid production rate. Similarly, as Huang Feng faded out, the legacy was handed to Sammo Hung, who took up directing and replaced Huang's kung fu film style with his signature comedic kung fu film. Thus the era changed.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Shaw Brothers, the evolution of Golden Harvest was especially evident. Moving on to 1979, 1980, Li Han-hsiang and Chang Cheh were still the key directors at Shaws. Its highest-grossing directors then were Lau Kar-leung and Chor Yuen, who were both from Guangdong but also veteran filmmakers who had joined the fray since the 1950s. More worthy of note is that the new core directors at Shaws in the 1970s, including Kuei Chih-hung (debut film: *A Time for Love*, 1970), Pao Hsueh-li (debut film: *Oath of Death*, 1971), Sun Chung (debut film: *The Devil's Mirror*, 1972), Hua Shan (debut film: *The Super Inframan*, 1975) and Mou Tun-fei (debut film: *Bank-busters*, 1978), all grew up in Taiwan. It wasn't until the 1980s before Shaws used local Hong Kong directors who grew up after the war, such as Wong Jing, who directed *Challenge of the Gamesters* (1981), Alfred Cheung, who made *Let's Make Laugh* (1983) and Ann Hui, who directed *Love in a Fallen City* (1984); at least five, six years behind Golden Harvest.

### **A Sea Change in Attitudes**

The rise of the young, local directors in Golden Harvest brought significant changes to the face of Hong Kong film, both in technical aspects and from a social perspective. It is difficult to offer an in-depth analysis here, so let us focus on two points. One is, of course, the issue of Cantonese-speaking films. Shaws' emphasis on Mandarin films continued until the early 1980s; even though the Cantonese trend began with Chor

Yuen's *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973) under Shaws, it was in fact Michael Hui's cheeky comedy *Games Gamblers Play* that really presented a Hong Kong Cantonese film and made the dialect a stand-out feature of its own. From then on, be it the absurd slang found in comedic kung fu films or the high-budget comedies that Cinema City created, all of them were striving to be a Hui comedy and not the earlier Cantonese works by Chor Yuen (for example, *Hong Kong 73*, 1974). Both used the more familiar Cantonese language, but between the two generations of directors, there was a difference in style – the new generation was more lively and its colloquialism spoke louder to the people. As for Li Han-hsiang and Lo Wei, they also made comedies that sold well, but because their actors spoke Mandarin in the films, it simply lacked that gripping familiarity, even when they hired Michael and Sam Hui; box-office sales was still miles away.

The other characteristic is the positive value in the films. Films in the past emphasised the kind nature of people and often used neighbourly relations as part of the plot, highlighting the traditional virtue of helping each other. But the new generation of films focused on individual abilities and successes; good intentions were not necessary, but results always were. These two values are not entirely contradictory, but in the 1970s, the different generations of directors displayed that divide. Living under the same roof, the neighbourly spirit of helping each other out was the tradition, or even foundation, of Cantonese as well as Mandarin films in the 1950s and 60s. Even in the 1970s, the earlier generation of directors of blockbuster comedies would still show this sort of plot design. For example, Chor Yuen's *The House of 72 Tenants* and *Hong Kong 73*, Lo Wei's Mandarin film *Back Alley Princess* (1973), and Yeung Kuen's Cantonese film *Country Bumpkin* (1974), the characters all lived in a house with almost ten households, one of them would get bullied and the rest of the community would pitch in to support him or her.

In the end of Chor Yuen's *Hong Kong 73*, there is even a typhoon that batters the building and puts everyone in danger, but the residents pull together and save each other, mirroring the spirit of 'all for one and one for all' as found in 1953 classic *In the Face of Demolition*. In contrast, Bruce Lee's humorous *Way of the Dragon*, which he directed and starred in, builds the comedy on the simple country boy that is Bruce Lee's character, who is later respected for his incredible power after he single-handedly saves a restaurant from a crisis. With only good intentions, efficiency is seen to be sacrificed, which in reality will leave you with a cruel gap between your dreams and end results. This is what the famous quote in Michael Hui's *Games Gamblers Play* points out: working hard doesn't make you money; just look at the cows up north! In Hui's *The Private Eyes* (1976), the thief-catching scene in the supermarket directly uses this want for results as comedic material.

Sam Hui is chasing a thief in the supermarket and the thief, played by Wong Ha, goes into a fierce tiger-crane-dragon-snake-panther fist pose. But with one nimble flying kick from Sam Hui, the thief flies into the air. It's symbolic slapstick: traditional posing is impractical and doesn't stand a chance in the face of modern practicality. Michael Hui's movies don't reject love and warmth; when he nabs the Maltesers quick as lightning from Sam Hui's mouth in the end, bringing the two and Ricky Hui together, that is a show of touching emotion. But the reason this action is heartwarming is because he had been the joke throughout the whole movie, coming up to all sorts of failures, until finally he proves himself and regains his dignity, which becomes the foundation of his befriending Sam Hui again. Compared to films from the 1950s and 60s, which saw no connection between community bond and abilities, the most important thing is to respect and help each other, such as in *In the Face of Demolition* or Zhu Shilin's *Between Fire and Water* (1955). Here, in contrast, employers or seniors are synonyms of corruption and heartlessness; moments of bosses resolving issues with the lowly workers are rare. But in Michael Hui's biggest box-office hits, *The Private Eyes* (1976) and *Security Unlimited* (1980), it was all about how members of a company from top to bottom end up united, becoming like family. Just from this point, you can see how perceptions had shifted between the two generations of filmmakers.

The desire for practicality was also reflected in Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan's kung fu comedies. In *The Prodigal Son* (1981), Leung Chan, played by Yuen Biu, asks, 'Master, is this Wing Chun?' Sammo Hung, playing Wong Bo-wah, replies, 'Who cares if I grow bloody wings, if I can beat someone up it's the real thing.' At the end of *The Young Master* (1980), Jackie Chan doesn't win in the way of past kung fu films, where he works hard and learns some secret martial arts legacy left by his master; he is merely numbed after taking some opium that left him able to take a beating, and goes crazy fighting back in any way he can. These no longer spoke of the kung fu inheritance tradition, where the conclusion is made from the hard work in earning experience and becoming someone.

In the 1970s, these young directors looked beyond the kindness of heart as the key virtue to focus on one's abilities and talent, establishing a new kind of self-image in Hong Kong cinema. This new perspective was found in earlier films by Li Han-hsiang and Chang Cheh, but it didn't take root until this time, growing into the foundation of the future of Hong Kong cinema. And whether it had intended to establish this concept or not, its flexibility in adapting to the market and hiring talent led Golden Harvest to bring on a monumental transformation in the creative backbone as well as social perceptions in Hong Kong cinema. (Translated by Diane To)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although *Thunderbolt* was released in 1973, it was completed in 1971.
- <sup>2</sup> Sammo Hung was always the martial arts choreographer in Huang Feng's films. In Hung's directorial debut *The Iron-Fisted Monk* (1977), Huang was one of the writers.

**Po Fung** is Research Officer of the HKFA.

## Feature

### Cherishing Moments with Master King Hu

Sha Yung-fong

#### Dreaming of Master Hu

I left Taiwan many years ago; Union Film Company has long become a thing of the past. Yet scenes of Union Film still often appear in my dreams. And always, there are the moments with director King Hu leading us in work, in conversation. I am reminded especially of the days in 1965 when Master Hu left Shaw Brothers and quietly arrived in Taiwan to join Union Film. That was the year that changed King Hu's life and changed the destiny of Union Film.

At the time, King Hu had just finished filming *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and his contract with Shaws was expiring. Shaws thought Master Hu still owed the company six movies and relations between the two sides became very unpleasant. So Master Hu quietly left Shaws. Union Film had seen that Run Run Shaw was unhappy with Hu's slow pace of work, and that Master Hu suffered humiliation at Shaws. The company had been expecting that day to come, because Hu often had secret meetings with Union Film's Hong Kong representative Chang Tao-jan while he was still at Shaws, chatting about the future of and his visions for Mandarin film. Chang also told Director Hu my thoughts: 'The traditional stardom system in the Hong Kong and Taiwan film industry has to change. It has to nurture new talent, save on the large celebrity pay cheques and move the resources into other production budgets. We must aim for quality over quantity, then we can make some good films and open up a new future in filmmaking.'

In fact, by this time, Union Film was already in the midst of building a major studio (an underground water supply pipe and an eight-metre wide road in the studio was completed. When *Dragon Inn* (1967, Hong Kong release: 1968) was being shot on location outside, they constructed a soundstage in the studio to shoot the inside scenes. The future direction was aimed at reaching international standards and we were determined to lead Mandarin films into international film festivals. Cannes Film Festival was our first goal, then the ultimate goal was to get an Oscar. I made a sincere offer to Director Hu to join Union Film and lead us in reaching for our dreams. My ideas were well appreciated by Director Hu; he felt much the same, and asked me to give him time to think it over.

After careful consideration, Director Hu took up my offer and signed a two-year contract in Hong Kong, penned by himself, on 15 August, 1966. Before he flew to Taiwan, both sides kept it strictly confidential.

### **Leading us in work**

After King Hu arrived in Taiwan, he took over as production manager at Union Film and began work to set up a production department, recruiting new blood. He invited the famous author Xu Xu, up-and-coming directors Li Hsing, Sung Chuen-sau, Yang Shih-ching and Union Film deputy chief Hua Hui-ying to form an adjudication panel, with King Hu himself as the examiner. After going through many auditions – first test, second test, screen test – they admitted six girls: Hsu Feng, Polly Shang-kuan Ling-feng, Han Hsiang-chin, Nancy Yen, Yang Mong-hua, Zhao Yingying; and six boys: Shih Chun, Roc Tien Peng, Pai Ying, Qi Wei, Wan Tsung-shan, Wen Tian. A series of on-the-job training for four months followed, finally ending with a motivational speech about professional ethics and personal values. The aim was to improve the bad habits and culture rampant in the film industry.

The cost for a film company to nurture an actor until they gain fame is incalculable. And as soon as their actors struck it big, many companies would exploit their fame to make money. But this made the actors' loyalties waver and it often ended up with nasty contract disputes. Because of this, many companies were no longer willing to nurture new talent. But Union Film's new blood mostly had solid professional ethics, stood by their contract agreements and got along well with the company. For this, I am most pleased. Of the new recruits, Hsu Feng and Shih Chun became the most famous – the two shining stars of Union Film. During their six-year contracts with Union Film, Hsu Feng merely starred in two films, *A Touch of Zen* (1970, Hong Kong release: 1971) and *City Called Dragon* (1970); while Shih Chun starred in four: *Dragon Inn*, *A Touch of Zen*, *Wild Flame* (1970) and *City Called Dragon*. The company did not force them into cash cows by scheduling them into excessive numbers of movies.

During the shoots of *Dragon Inn* and *A Touch of Zen*, King Hu endured serious blows and obstacles, but he pushed on with a seriousness to his filmmaking and a fearlessness of hardship. He was always hands-on, personally exploring the locations for shoots, sketching, drawing out the storyboards. At the time in the Mandarin film industry, storyboards with both sketches and caption were rare. Director Hu was a perfectionist; he demanded perfection in everything from shots, colour, audio, dialogue, down to the details of each prop and costume.

### **Bringing Beijing opera into martial arts films**

Director Hu personally wrote the scripts to many films, including *Come Drink with Me*, *Dragon Inn*, *A Touch of Zen*, all remarkable pieces. His particularly outstanding skills in editing and artistry were given full play in his martial arts action films.

King Hu loved martial arts films. It came from his personal research into Ming Dynasty history and obsession with classical literature, such as *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, as well as Beijing opera. The unique sound effects in *Dragon Inn* were inspired by the gongs and drums from Beijing opera.

King Hu had his own view on the art of directing. He said, 'I think in terms of the film, the theme does not matter, a good or bad story and the theme of the movie are not enough to affect the actual movie; the most important thing is presentation.'

Year 2005 marked the centenary of Chinese cinema. Alongside the awards ceremony of the 24th Hong Kong Film Awards, a selection of the top 100 classic Chinese films was hosted in commemoration. A selection panel of 100 academics, film critics and experts chose the top 100 Chinese-language films ever made. Under Union Film, King Hu's *Dragon Inn* placed seventh and *A Touch of Zen* placed ninth. It was an incredible success that our children and children's children will forever remember: he allowed Taiwan's Union Film to produce two of the top ten films in the history of Chinese cinema.

### **Costs of a top accolade**

Speaking of *A Touch of Zen*, the international glory garnered was also unprecedented, as it won the Grand prix de la commission supérieure technique at the 28th Cannes Film Festival in 1975. It was a dream come true: we achieved our ambition to get into Cannes. Years later, director Ang Lee visited the painstakingly-created ancient city set, built in the Danan studio for *A Touch of Zen*. Though it was just a set, they actually built an entire ancient city, spanning hundreds of acres; the first set constructed so meticulously in a Taiwan film studio. It included ancient city buildings, a castle, bell towers, drum towers, a manor house, back gardens, water gardens, pavilions, restaurants, teahouses, cloth dying workshops, temples, banks, cloth shops, other stores, county government buildings, streets and alleys, houses and courtyards, scenery and landscapes, all there. Proper streets stretching a total of 600 feet were also built. It took more than a year to complete.

This ancient city was detailed down to minute parts of window and door frames. Typically, paint is used to control how aged the prop looks when making set furniture. But under the orders of King Hu, Union Film created century-old-looking furniture by torching the surface of the wood, sanding it down, over and over again, until it looked like it came from 100 years ago. The manor house and water garden in *A Touch of Zen* were beautifully crafted with exquisitely-detailed carve work done; during the shoot, smoky effects were used to create that ghostly atmosphere that was as haunting in real life as it was in the film. The outdoor location was overgrown with weeds, which were

then replaced with idyllic reeds. But the heat from intense movie lighting saw the reeds die off in two, three days. As the dead ones got replaced, day in day out, the local reed population was being used up by the filmmakers, as was the Chinese silvergrass; yet the director still refused to use sloppy background props. Cinematographer Hua Hui-ying then made an unspeakable suggestion: replant all the reed and Chinese silvergrass and reshoot everything next year when they bloom. It was intended as a joke at the time, but King Hu took up the idea and let the vegetation grow for a year, shooting other scenes elsewhere in the meantime. And with that level of conscientiousness, *A Touch of Zen* was filmed over five years. Of course the shareholders complained, but as the person in charge, I had to have the vision and the courage to get us achieving our ambition of entering Cannes. On the one hand I kept trying to appease the shareholders, while on the other I continued to support Director Hu in finishing *A Touch of Zen*. Finally, our dream came true, but that also ushered in the premature end of Union Film.

In 1978, King Hu was chosen one of the world's top five directors because of *A Touch of Zen*. This prestigious annual accolade by *International Film Guide* had a rich, long history, and Kurosawa Akira was the only other Asian director who had been given the same recognition in the past. Union Film gained tremendous international influence, as barely any of the great directors from Hong Kong, China and Taiwan were selected for consideration, yet King Hu was chosen as the first Chinese director to be held in such high esteem. His outstanding success put him safely at number one in the Chinese film industry. I am deeply honoured to have been a working partner in Master Hu's creations at the pinnacle of his shining career, and these memories will be cherished for the rest of my life. (Translated by Diane To)

**Editor's note:** Hsu Feng had a cameo part in *Dragon Inn*.

**Sha Yung-fong** is a renowned Taiwanese film expert and one of the co-founders of Union Film Company. He has a close relationship with the Hong Kong film industry and supported director Li Han-hsiang's Grand Motion Picture Company to make films in Taiwan.

Special thanks to Mr Sha Yung-fong and the Chinese Taipei Film Archive for supplying the accompanying photos (taken from *Filmmakers Series 3: Memoirs of Sha Yung-fong*, Chinese Taipei Film Archive, 2006).

## Acquisition

### An Encounter with Mr Chang Ming-chuen

Priscilla Chan

As I write this, the scenes unfold again in my head. Even though this happened close to a year ago, nevertheless, these happy memories remain indelible in my mind.

In June, 2012, we received a phone call from Mr Ma Tung-shing, a relative of Mr Chang Ming-chuen ('Uncle Chang'). He said that Uncle Chang had a batch of photos and screenplays from the 1940s and 50s, which he believed would be a fine addition to our film holdings. Under the arrangement of Mr Ma, we seized upon this opportunity to meet with Uncle Chang at his home.

Uncle Chang recounted to us stories of how he entered the film industry. It all began when Mui Yau-cheuk – through the connections of his marriage to actress Tso Yi-man and her brother Tso Tat-wah – came up with this idea to invest in a film production studio. It so happened that Uncle Chang's cousin was Mui's friend, and so under his recommendation, Uncle Chang began to work as General Manager at the Youqiao Film Studios headed by Tso Tat-wah. Located in Kowloon City, facing the northwest side of the Hau Wong Temple, Youqiao was adjoined to two other film studios, Unilight and Kwokar. It had an area of 40,000 square feet and housed two soundstages – one that was dedicated to Cantonese-speaking films, and was used primarily by Youqiao Film Production Company and Man Wah Film Company; and another for Mandarin-speaking films, which was mainly rented out to other production companies.

Aside from working as General Manager, Uncle Chang also participated as a crew member for the productions of Youqiao and Man Wah. He first served as a script holder for directors Wu Pang and Yam Pang-nin, was later promoted to Assistant Director, and finally, under the invitation of Tso Tat-wah, Uncle Chang began to write screenplays for Youqiao and Man Wah. Uncle Chang loved to read martial arts novels, and wrote his first screenplay *Thirteen Heroes with Seven Swords – Parts 1 & 2* (1949) under the pen name of Chang Kam-ming. The film did well at the box office and from then on, Uncle Chang began his days as a screenwriter. Uncle Chang can still remember how in those days, a screenplay commission was around HK\$200. Together with his salary as General Manager and the fact that he was accommodated on studio

premises, life in those days was pretty comfortable indeed.

Uncle Chang recounted stories of his life 60 years back, pulling them out of his memory like family heirlooms. For example, on the evening of 19 November, 1948, Tso Yi-man was still eating a late night dinner with the crew; however, by the next day they received the news that Tso had died in her sleep. This news came completely out of the blue for everyone, and the movie she was acting in, *Romance Forever* (1949), had to be completed by a body-double. In 1952, they were filming a movie starring Zhou Manhua in the Mandarin-speaking soundstage of Youqiao when the heavy lighting demands caused the electrical system to be overloaded. The wires short-circuited, caught on fire and in a single night, reduced the entire studio to ashes. This slowed down Mui Yau-cheuk's productions in Hong Kong, and so Uncle Chang, in addition to writing film scripts, assisted Tso Tat-wah in running the Palace Theatre on Pei Ho Street, Sham Shui Po until 1953, when he started his own business in Fanling.

The first time we met with Uncle Chang, he and his wife enthusiastically shared with us the photos they had kept safely for over 60 years as well as the stories behind them. Many of the photos were taken by Uncle Chang using leftover film reels.

Since June last year, Uncle Chang has donated three batches of film-related materials, including over a hundred photos and three screenplays: *Thirteen Heroes with Seven Swords – Parts 1, 3 & 4* (1949), *Burning Down the Pingyang City* (1950). We are very grateful for Uncle and Auntie Chang for keeping such valuable materials safe and donating them to us, and for not allowing them to be lost in time.

It is wonderful when opportunities knock. Even more precious is when after the knocks are answered, values are shared, mutual respect is developed and bonds are cemented. For film archivists, such resonance is not just with the people, but also with the materials, in that they embody the work and ultimately the spirit of those who realise them. (Translated by Hofan Chau)

**Priscilla Chan** is Film Acquisition Officer of the HKFA.

## Feature

### In Remembrance of Chen Chuhui: The Cinematic Career of a Chaozhou Opera Supreme Divo

May Ng

Revered by many as the supreme divo of Chaozhou opera for her cross-dressing stage personae, Chen Chuhui was a homegrown actor poised for early stardom after making her bow on the stage in 1956 at the tender age of 13. The heyday that Chaozhou-dialect cinema enjoyed in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 60s launched her dual career in television and film in 1960, starring in over 50 Chaozhou-dialect films – almost one-third of the total output of 160 titles – in the span of just a few years. Adopting her male personae, Chen's screen presence has been filled with memorable roles that endeared her to a legion of local and overseas film buffs and left many precious remnants for Chaozhou opera.

In the face of the dwindling popularity of Chaozhou-dialect films starting the mid-1960s, Chen embarked on an overseas stage career, riding the fame she acquired from a film repertoire widely distributed in Southeast Asia and propelling her popularity as a Chaozhou opera supreme divo to new heights with a phenomenally received tour. She took a break from her stage career in the 1970s to focus on her family life but came back from the hiatus in 1980, establishing her self-named Chuhui Chaozhou Opera Troupe in 1990 and had since remained active at home and abroad, collaborating with a string of Mainland Chaozhou opera troupes and sparing no efforts to promote the art of Chaozhou opera and nurture new talent. So unswerving in her devotion to the art that she, despite ill health, insisted on making an appearance at the Fourth Chaozhou Opera Festival in Shantou, Guangdong last September.

Chen passed away on 23 October last year at the age of 69 to the great loss and grief of Chaozhou opera fans everywhere. As a tribute and remembrance of Chen Chuhui, this article will chronicle her extraordinary life and work on the silver screen and her impressive array of screen personae.<sup>1</sup>

#### Road to Stardom

A Guangdong native of Puning, Chaoshan, Chen Chuhui (real name Chen Yuzhen) was born in Hong Kong in 1943. In 1953, she was accepted into the Xin Tian Cai Chaozhou Opera Troupe and studied under the tutelage of Zhang Mujin the singing style, hand gestures and posturing of Chaozhou opera while learning the ropes of paper shadow theatre. Also taken under the wing of Zhang at the time was Zheng Chuxiang, who specialised in *dan* – the female lead role. A three-year mentorship

ensued and the apprentice made her stage debut in *A Double Sword* in 1956. Having identified business opportunities in the sizeable Chaozhou-speaking diaspora communities in Southeast Asia, film distributors began dubbing Mandarin, Cantonese and even Amoy-dialect singsong films into the Chaozhou dialect, which were shown to the delight of many dialect-speaking audiences overseas. Players and musicians of Chaozhou opera were duly enlisted to lend their voices and hands to these dubbed reincarnations, with Chen dubbing the singing parts for Yam Kim-fai, Law Kim-long and Lam Kar-sing and many of her Cantonese contemporaries within a short spell of over a year.<sup>2</sup> Chen credited this experience of studying the works of Cantonese opera stars as her acting inspiration<sup>3</sup> and, perhaps by the same token, she got the gist of film acting almost from the outset and successfully avoided the common faux pas of verging on the overtly theatrical.

*The Story of Wang Jinlong*, released by Tuojiang Film Company in 1955, was Hong Kong's first Chaozhou-dialect film. It was quickly followed by the release of a dozen more Chaozhou-dialect films – invariably period dramas with narratives strung together by intermittent songs – catering to overseas markets such as Singapore, Malaya, Thailand and Vietnam. Though a number of these films went on general release in Hong Kong, the Chaozhou-dialect film craze didn't really kick off until 1960 when the Guangdong Academy of Chaozhou Opera travelled to the territory in May with their stage performances of *Chen San and Fifth Madam*, *Sixth Madam Su* and *Reunion through Window Sweeping*, first winning popular acclaim in Hong Kong before taking Southeast Asia by storm, and finally reaching a fever pitch with *Sixth Madam Su* (1960), the big-screen adaptation starring a cast of Mainland Chaozhou opera players. The massive popularity enjoyed by Chaozhou-dialect films lent extra momentum to the trend<sup>4</sup> and made Xin Tian Cai Chaozhou Opera Troupe the most sought-after name and a highly pursued source of talent in the local film industry. Indeed, Xin Tian Cai amply supplied the talents necessary to fill roles both on- and behind-the-screen: impresario Zhang Mujin, helming a team of backstage musicians, was responsible for music conduction and composition; his protégées Chen Chuhui and Zheng Chuxiang, alongside principal actor Zhang Yingyan, were also given their break in cinema.

Chen Chuhui's screen debut in *The Stepmother*, a Chaolian Film Company production, premiered in Thailand in September 1960. The film handbill informs that it was adapted from well-known traditional play, *Hong Naiwu, the Impostor in the Nuptial Chamber*, in which Chen plays the role of the mistreated stepson, Naiwen, opposite the female lead Zheng Chuxiang, and He Yizeng, a familiar face and recurring name in Chaozhou cinema as his screen nemesis, stepbrother Naiwu, representing a well-blended cast of old stalwarts and new recruits. Since the film was

never released on DVD and therefore out of public circulation, its inclusion in a donation of film copies by the Television Broadcasts Limited to the Hong Kong Film Archive some years ago made receiving the gift all the more meaningful. When Chen graciously granted the Film Archive the privilege of a follow-up interview for its Oral History Project last year, I seized the chance and brought her the ‘good news’, only to meet with a less-than-enthusiastic response from Chen who dismissed her early acting days as crude and expressed wishes for it to remain buried than brought to the limelight.

Chen’s second film, *Meet in the Wood* (1960), was by Tor Ying Film Co, starring Zhang Yingyan of Xin Tian Cai and Zeng Shanfeng from Thailand as the leading couple with Chen featured in a cameo role as a singsong fisherman’s daughter. Essaying a female role in a film for the first and only time, Chen embellished her performance of two song numbers with stylistic gestures of Chaozhou opera, her body swaying to the rhythm of a gently rocking boat. (Though she was cast in roles of her natural gender in *Woman Scholar* [1962], *Prefecture Chief Qiao Arbitrarily Fills out Marriage Contracts* [1964], her characters inevitably involve the antic of double-cross-dressing.)

*Unchanged Hearts* (1961), Bian Sing Motion Picture’s adaptation of *Reunion through Window Sweeping* – the play that first catapulted Chen to fame – marked her third screen appearance. In it, she plays Gao Wenju, the newly crowned Number One Scholar coerced by the Prime Minister to abandon his wife, Wang Jinzhen (played by Fang Qiaoyu), and remarry. An arduous search leads the wife to a reunion when she, separated and obscured by a row of windows, confronts Gao under the pretence of sweeping the windows. From the initial confrontation to hearing the woman’s profession of identity as his lawful wife, Chen portrays perfectly the rollercoaster of emotions: from bewilderment to rage (at being called by his personal name) and suspicion (of falling victim to a prank pulled by the Prime Minister’s daughter); from listening to the visitor’s account of her circumstances with feigned composure, through their emotional reunion, to bursting with indignation and instructing the wife to write a ‘blank petition’ to the imperial magistrate to have the wrong righted. Undoubtedly, Chen took a quantum leap forward with her poignant and richly layered acting and wowed the audience along the way. Chen was all set for a brilliant career ahead of her, co-starring with Zeng Shanfeng and Zheng Chuxiang in a succession of films for Tor Ying and Bian Sing, including *Farewell to the Husband* (1961), *The Misplaced Love-Token* (1962), *Woman Scholar*. She was also sought after by United Motion Picture, which teamed her up with Fang Qiaoyu in *The Red-Haired Steed* (1963), *Perfect Lady* (1963) and *The Execution* (1967).

In 1962, Kong Ngee Company of Singapore set up a Chaozhou-dialect

film-making offshoot and collaborated with Xin Tian Cai on the production of *Phoenix Ornaments* (1962) in which Chen plays Lu You, the poet of the Southern Song dynasty, opposite Zeng Shanfeng as the ill-fated female cousin Tang Huixian, directed by 'Studio head director Chan Man' (as hailed by the film handbill). Following the establishment of Chiu Ngee under the Kong Ngee umbrella, Chen was teamed up with newcomer Chen Lili in a classic coupling of 'the scholar and the beauty' in *Dream in Peony Pavilion* (1963), *Story of Plum Blossom* (1963), *Story of the Thorn Hairpin* (1964) as well as the opera adaptations, *No Greater Love* (1963) and *Lovers Bridged by the Wall* (1964). In 1964, Chiu Ngee signed Chen to star in *The Scholar Cui Mingfeng* (in two parts, 1968) among her next (and last) batch of films.

### **Prototype of the Young Male Lead**

During the high days of Chaozhou-dialect films Chen has also worked with many renowned directors of Cantonese cinema, such as Lee Sun-fung, Lee Tit, Chan Man and, more frequently, Law Chi-hung whose directorial credits included a host of Chaozhou opera films starring players from the Guangdong Academy of Chaozhou Opera. *The Misplaced Love-Token, A Common Scholar* (1963), *The Red-Haired Steed* (1963), *Perfect Lady, Nymph of the River Lo* (1966)<sup>5</sup> were named as her personal favourites but the copies of many films she appeared in had since been sadly lost save for two and a half titles: the second half of *A Common Scholar, The Red-Haired Steed* and *Nymph of the River Lo*. To the disappointment of Chen's fans, the remnants of her operatic artistry and vocal dexterity are only preserved in her signature film, *Perfect Lady*, and her chart-topping album *The Misplaced Love-Token*,<sup>6</sup> as Zhang Yingyan recalls.

Law Chi, director of *The Red-Haired Steed*, was an up-and-coming talent who had worked through the ranks from script continuity for Ng Wui, Lee Tit and Chun Kim to taking the directorial reins for a number of Chaozhou-dialect films. Crisp, clear and fast-paced, Law's early works gave great promise of excellence: working for the Chaozhou-dialect film-making hub of Tung Shan Film Co on *A Pair of Carved Jade* (1961), Luo delineates the dilemmas and tensions built into the characters with clarity and deliberation, propelling the development of the narrative and mise-en-scène with whimsical but measured tread that keeps the audience on the edge of their seats. In *The Red-Haired Steed*, Law gives full display to the minute emotions vividly expressed on Chen's face as General Xue Pinggui, most notably during his first appearance, his head turning and his face, framed in the forefront of the camera, growing weary and worry-laden when summoned back by the governor's maid. In the scene at Wujiapo when Xue, pondering the question of his wife's fidelity and subjecting her to scrutiny, finally gets to hear her account of hardship, a paucity of

tender affection flickers across his eyes, quickly overwhelmed by a hearty dose of self-chastising. Chen fleshes out the character with gentle humanity that is faithfully preserved in unadorned sequences.

*Nymph of the River Lo*, a colour Chaozhou opera film and Lee Sun-fung's uncredited work,<sup>7</sup> was another remarkable film in the genre. Starring opposite Zhang Yingyan as the sly and scheming Cao Pi, Chen brings operatic theatrics and meticulously crafted performance to her cross-dressing role as the high-spirited and graceful Cao Zhi, bouncing sparks of dramatic fireworks off her co-star.

Chen Chuhui was also valued for her versatile acting range: whether playing a poised, refined scholar or complex characters fraught with setbacks and difficult circumstances, her portrayals are subtle and reserved, richly layered and rivetingly gripping. Her performance in *Prince Lau Chiang* (1963) is one such fine example. Directed by Lee Sun-fung, Chen plays the title character who has little inkling of his royal lineage and a deadly family feud with Grand Empress Dowager Lü. When he is made a marquee after saving his unwitting nemesis, his world becomes a boiling, emotional cauldron, fuelled by doubts over the truth of his birth revealed by the daughter of Grand Commander Zhou and confusions of being pressed by Lü to kill his own father, compounded by the succession of joy, grief, remorse and self-condemnation upon recognising his father in the imperial dungeon, the overriding tone of tragic foreboding culminating in the father's sacrificial suicide in a dire attempt to win the confidence of the Empress Dowager for the son. Again, Chen rises to the occasion with ease, inhabiting her character on the emotional journey emphatically and fluidly from an unwitting, untrusting and sceptical young man to experiencing a mixture of joy and regrets before strengthening his resolve to restore to the throne its rightful heir.

The key to delving into the psyche of her characters, Chen believes, lies in 'having an astute, intuitive grasp of the human emotions of happiness, anger, sadness and joy, and an ability to immerse in the characters and mapping their emotional ebbs and flows to the melodramatic peaks and lows of the narrative.' An early operatic training not only gave her a solid foundation in the basics which, coupled with a dexterity for gong-and-drum theatrics, also enabled her to develop and bring her characters to the full extent.<sup>8</sup>

The gist of a successful opera player, summarised by the maestro herself in a few lines, is particularly relevant to the *qiandan* (female impersonator) and *kunsheng* (male impersonator), whose control over the breadth and depth of delivery as well the comprehension of sentiments and the artistry in expressing them – that is, the connection between a mental state and its external manifestation – may make or break a performance. This insight will undoubtedly guide the audience to a new

appreciation of Chen's artistry.

The craze of Chaozhou-dialect cinema of Hong Kong died out almost as quickly as it started. Barring the odd later efforts such as Chor Yuen's *Farewell to a Warrior* (1976) for Shaw Brothers, the genre was blessed with a lifespan of a short decade from blossoming to decline, bringing Chen Chuhui's film career prematurely to a close at age 25 and depriving the fledgling talent of the chance to hone her onscreen craft to maturity. Alas, the opera stage's gain was a huge loss for the cinema. Regardless, Chen has made an established name for herself in cinema with her exceptional talents and charisma, starring alongside a prestigious string of *dan* actors in an impressive array of Chaozhou opera films that give equal weight and importance to *sheng* (male) and *dan* (female) roles. In bringing the essence of the *sheng* role of traditional Chaozhou opera to the silver screen, she reinvigorated the traditional *dan*-dominated opera cinema featuring exclusively Chaozhou opera players from the Mainland, a pioneering contribution that is worth remembering. (Translated by Agnes Lam)

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A lot of materials used in this article have been drawn from the personal accounts of Chen Chuhui, supplemented by interviews with Zhang Yingyan, Liu Fuguang and Tang Dixun. The writer wishes to express her gratitude to these opera veterans.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Chu (interviewer), 'Oral History Interview: Chen Chuhui', Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2 September 1998 (in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> Yim Siu-wai, 'An introduction to Chaozhou Opera and An Interview with Chaozhou Opera Supreme Divo Chen Chuhui', *Chinese Opera Information Centre Newsletter*, No 3, Hong Kong: Chinese Opera Information Centre, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1 September 2001 (in Chinese).

<sup>4</sup> 'Prospects Look Good for Chaozhou-dialect Films in Hong Kong. Another Way to Go for Big-name Directors', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 11 July 1961 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> See note 2, and Qian Feng, *The Chaozhou Sound Overseas: A Critical Biography of Chen Chuhui*, Bahe Organisation, 2000, p 21 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Po Fung (interviewer), 'Oral History Interview: Zhang Yingyan', Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 17 July 2012 (in Chinese).

<sup>7</sup> Gao Ge was credited as director in newspaper ad and VCD, but the film was actually directed by Lee Sun-fung according to Zhang Yingyan. See note 6.

<sup>8</sup> See note 3.

**Editor's note:** The aforesaid Chaozhou-dialect films were released in different times in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. The year in parentheses following a film title is the earliest time of its release as per

our research findings.

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A monograph on Hong Kong's Chaozhou-dialect films and a screening programme of such films will be launched by the end of 2013.