

A Brief History of Hong Kong Cinema

By Paul Fonoroff

THE DIFFICULTY of writing about Hong Kong film history is that so few remnants of it exist. One reason for this is the cramped living conditions in the territory—there simply isn't much space to store films or scripts or magazines. Another factor is the low regard in which Chinese (and particularly Cantonese) films have been held. The Japanese occupation during World War II also exacted its toll. The occupation army reportedly melted down every inch of film stock it could lay its hands on in order to extract the silver base. What the Japanese did not destroy or the Chinese discard fell prey to the heat and humidity. Today, there is not one pre-war Hong Kong film in the territory. A handful remain in the Peking Film Archives (unseen by anyone) and a few may be rotting in the cellars of old movie theatres in Southeast Asia. But the result is that Hong Kong audiences and film historians have no opportunity to view at first hand the products of the first forty years of Hong Kong's film industry. We must rely on magazines (difficult to come by—no film library exists in Hong Kong), published memoirs and interviews by those few figures from the early Hong Kong cinema who bothered to record their thoughts or who are still alive.

Hong Kong enjoys a long film history, almost as long as the movies themselves, dating back to a visit by a camera crew from the Lumière studio in 1896.¹ However, it wasn't until thirteen years after the Lumière visit, in 1909, that Hong Kong played host to its first dramatic film production when Shanghai's Asia Film Studio came south to shoot *Stealing the Roast Duck*². 偷燒鴨, directed by and starring Liang

¹Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen, 《中國電影發展史》 [*The History of the Development of Chinese Film*] (Peking, 1962), p. 6.

²It was not until the 1960s that it became common practice to assign Hong Kong films an official English title.

Shaobo 梁少波. The film's title sums up the plot of this comedy short: a skinny thief (Liang) steals an obese food vendor's roast duck and is caught by a policeman (played by Li Beihai 黎北海, later a key figure in the development of Hong Kong cinema).

Asia was founded by an American, Benjamin Brosky, and was the first studio in China to produce movies with dramatic plots (albeit short films, as was the fashion then in world cinema). It has been generally acknowledged that *Stealing the Roast Duck* was but one of four Asia productions for 1909.³ However, the unavailability of prints and the lack of any eye-witness accounts of three of these films has led some historians to dispute this figure and claim *Stealing the Roast Duck* as Asia's only film that year.⁴ If this is indeed the case, then Hong Kong can claim to be the birthplace of Chinese dramatic movies.

In 1913, Brosky co-founded Hong Kong's first film studio, Huamei 華美 [Chinese-American], with Li Minwei 黎民偉,⁵ the "father of Hong Kong cinema". More than any other individual Li deserves credit for the development of Hong Kong motion pictures in the silent period. That this development was less than he hoped for was, as we shall see, due to factors beyond his control.

Huamei's first film, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* 莊子試妻, was scripted by Li and directed by his brother Li Beihai (the policeman in *Stealing the Roast Duck*). The philosopher Zhuangzi was played by Li Beihai and the female lead, Zhuangzi's wife, by the father of Hong Kong cinema himself.⁶ The simple plot (the movie was only two reels long) revolves around the recently widowed wife of Zhuangzi. Even though her husband's body is barely cold in the grave, she takes a lover. Surprise, surprise, the lover turns out to be Zhuangzi himself, who had faked his death in order to test his wife.

Huamei's first movie proved to be its last. After its completion, Brosky returned to America, taking the film with him. Thus the first movie produced by a Hong Kong film company was screened in America⁷ but never in Hong Kong. Li hoped to found another motion picture studio, but World War I broke out, putting a temporary hold on his plans.

Eight years later, in 1922, Li was finally able to form Hong Kong's first Chinese-owned movie company, China Sun Company 民新. After shooting a few documentaries, China Sun produced Hong Kong's first feature-length dramatic film, *Rouge* 胭脂, in 1924. *Rouge* is based on a story in the *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異, a classic compendium of bizarre tales from the Qing dynasty, though the film version sets the story in the 1920s.

³ Yu Jun, 《中國電影四十年》 ["Forty Years of Chinese Motion Pictures"], *Film Tribune* 《電影論壇》, II (1948), 3402.

⁴ Yu Mo-wan, 《香港電影掌故》 [*Anecdotes about Hong Kong Cinema*] (Hong Kong, 1985), pp. 22-23.

⁵ Born in Japan in 1892, died in Hong Kong in 1953.

⁶ It wasn't until the 1920s that the leading women's roles in Chinese films were played by women.

⁷ Guan Wenqing, 《中國銀幕外史》 [*Tales of the Chinese Film World*] (Hong Kong, 1976), p. 111.

Curiously, this Hong Kong “first” was shot not in Hong Kong but in Guangzhou, for two major reasons. The studio consisted of a building and vacant lot on a street which to this day bears the name Ngan Mok 銀幕 [Silver Screen] Street. Unfortunately, this street is carved out of solid bedrock. In the 1920s, there was a water shortage in Hong Kong, and China Sun found it impossible to sink a well to provide water for its film lab. An even greater hindrance was the Hong Kong government’s procrastination in issuing China Sun a permit to build a proper shooting stage, forcing Li and company to go north to Guangzhou.⁸ Written by Li Beihai, directed by the two Li brothers, and starring Li Minwei and his wife Lin Chuchu 林楚楚,⁹ *Rouge* was well received (it played for ten days and grossed HK\$10,000). But before China Sun could shoot another film, the Great Strike of 1925-26 broke out, causing among other things the closure of most local cinemas. Li moved China Sun to Shanghai, and Hong Kong’s Silver Screen Street was never home to a film company again.¹⁰

The Great Strike of 1925-26 spelled the end of a number of fledgling film companies, including China Sun’s Hong Kong operation. Most closed their doors for good while a few, such as Guangyi 光藝, relocated in Guangzhou. Guangzhou’s growth as a film centre in the late 1920s was a direct result of the Great Strike. Between 1925 and 1930, no movies were produced in Hong Kong while the Guangzhou studios managed to shoot about a dozen, more than Hong Kong’s entire



Lin Chuchu

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-113.

⁹ Hong Kong’s first movie star. Born in Canada in 1904, died in Hong Kong in 1979, she also starred in Shanghai-produced silent films, later graduating to character roles (usually cast as the kindly mother) and appearing in a number of Hong Kong-produced Cantonese movies in the 1950s.

¹⁰ In fact, only a few reels of test footage were ever shot there. Guan, *Tales*, p. 113.

output up to that time.¹¹ Once it became feasible to resume shooting in Hong Kong, however, Guangzhou's film industry entered a period of decline caused by a heavy tax on film stock and inconsistent government policies.¹²

In 1930, Hong Kong's film industry began its revival with the founding of the Hong Kong Film Company by Li Beihai. But what really put Hong Kong's movie business on the map was the 1930 merger of Li Minwei's China Sun with the North China Studio headed by Luo Mingyou 羅明佑, along with two other studios (Great China 大中華 and Shanghai), to form United Photoplay Service 聯華. Though United's head office was in Hong Kong, the major production facilities were located in what had emerged over the past decade as the Chinese Hollywood, Shanghai. A Hong Kong branch studio was set up in 1931 with Li Beihai as studio head.

United's Hong Kong studio produced four movies before it closed down in 1934 due to in-fighting and the after-effects of the Great Depression.¹³ Though its history was short, United had a strong impact on the Hong Kong movie scene. Its film school trained such major Cantonese directors as Li Tie 李鐵 and Huang Dai 黃岱; three of its four productions were directed by Guan Wenqing 關文清, who remained a leading director through the early 1960s; and these films helped launch the careers of two superstars of the Cantonese cinema: Wu Chufan 吳楚帆, whose career spanned three decades and over 250 films, and Huang Manli 黃曼梨, one of



Wu Chufan and Huang Manli

¹¹ These figures are based on a perusal of articles and advertisements in *Yinguang* 《銀光》 (Hong Kong, 1926-1927), *Yintan* 《銀壇》 (Hong Kong, 1933), *Screen Monthly* 《白幔》 (Guangzhou, 1931), *The Movie Guide Semi-Monthly* 《電影半月刊》 (Hong Kong, 1933), *Central Theatre Weekly* 《聲光週刊》 (Hong Kong, 1932-1933), and *Lingxing er zhounian jinian zhuanke* 《伶星二週年紀念專刊》 (Guangzhou, 1933), as well as Cheng *et al.*, *History of the Development* and Yu, *Anecdotes*. As other early Hong Kong film publications are discovered, perhaps other titles will turn up.

¹² *Variety Weekly* 《娛樂週報》, I (1935), 543. Guangzhou's film industry would not really develop until the founding of the Pearl River Studio after 1949.

¹³ Huo Long, 《聯華香港廠製片結束之前前後後》 [The Full Story of the Closing Down of Lianhua's Hong Kong Studio], *Movietone* 《電聲》 III (1934), 944.

the great leading ladies of the 1930s, who graduated to character roles in the 1950s and even in the mid-1980s was still gracing the screen.

Economics and in-fighting aside, another reason for United's failure in Hong Kong was Luo Mingyou's opposition to talking pictures.¹⁴ The first Cantonese-language talkie was produced not in Hong Kong but in Shanghai, by the Tianyi 天一 Studio, headed by the eldest of the Shaw Brothers, Shao Zuiweng 邵醉翁. The movie, *Platinum Dragon* 白金龍, starred Xue Juexian 薛覺先, one of the greatest Cantonese opera stars of the twentieth century. Xue himself adapted the screenplay from his Cantonese opera success of the same name, which itself was based on a Hollywood silent film starring Adolphe Menjou, *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* (1925). In the movie, Xue portrays a playboy named Bai Jinlong (literally "platinum dragon") who falls in love with a beautiful young lady he meets at a dance. She's repulsed by his cocky airs, and Bai decides that the only way he can be near her is by taking a job as a bellhop at her hotel. She finally falls in love with him, but she's promptly kidnapped by two men who hold her prisoner in a nightclub. Disguised as a rich lady, Bai gets into the club, frees the girl, and hands the kidnappers over to the police.¹⁵

The movie proved a resounding success upon its release in late 1933 not only in Hong Kong, but also in Guangzhou and throughout Southeast Asia. Directed by Tang Xiaodan 湯曉丹 (who directed *The Nanchang Uprising* 南昌起義 for the Shanghai Film Studio in 1981) with a script by Xue, this film proved to Shaw that the future for his studio lay in Hong Kong, and over the next two years he shifted his base of operations from Shanghai to the British territory.¹⁶

With the coming of talking pictures, Hong Kong films could compete with the opera stage.¹⁷ By recruiting such opera stars as Xue and Ma Shizeng 馬師曾, Hong Kong movies found a market beyond the narrow confines of the territory, extending to the sizeable Chinese populations in Southeast Asia and the relatively wealthy audiences in the Chinatowns of North America. The second Cantonese talking picture, *Singing Lovers* 歌侶情潮 (1934), was produced, again not in Hong Kong, but in the United States by the Grandview 大觀 Film Company, a studio initially funded by Chinese-Americans. Though *Singing Lovers* was shot in America, its story is more traditionally Chinese than *Platinum Dragon*. A beautiful Cantonese opera star discovers that a young, handsome peasant has singing talent and she helps him learn his craft. As he becomes famous, the two fall in love. A jealous colleague of the girl

¹⁴Ou Yongxiang, 《香港電影論》 [A Discussion of Hong Kong Cinema], *Film Tribune*, II (1948), 205. The main reason for his opposition is attributed in this article to the prosperity of Lianhua and, thus, its unwillingness to take a gamble. In this respect, Lianhua is analogous to MGM and Tianyi to Warner Brothers: the former, an industry giant, disdaining sound as upsetting the status quo; the latter, in trouble financially and willing to grab at any "novelty" to stay solvent.

¹⁵*Lingxing er zhounian jinian zhuanke* (Guangzhou, 1933), special supplement on *Bai Jinlong*.

¹⁶*Variety Weekly*, I (1935), 159. For the next five decades, studios run by the Shaw Brothers were the largest in Hong Kong.

¹⁷*Variety Weekly*, I (1935), 223.

hires a dance hostess to seduce the former peasant. He begins a life of debauchery, neglects his work and is eventually fired from the opera troupe. He soon realizes his folly but by then he is already reduced to singing in restaurants for a living. One day, the opera star hears his voice by chance. The two reunite and their love blossoms. With her help, he becomes a star again and they marry.

The success of *Singing Lovers* in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia heralded Grandview as a force to be reckoned with. The studio formally moved its base of operations to Hong Kong in 1935, and took its place alongside Nanyang 南洋 (Tianyi's Hong Kong operation) as one of the two major pre-War studios.

After the demise of United's Hong Kong branch, former studio boss Li Beihai founded the colony's first talking picture studio, Zhonghua 中華, and directed both the first partial-talkie, *Conscience* 良心 (late 1933), and the first all-talkie, *The Fool's Nuptial Chamber* 傻子洞房 (1934).¹⁸

Before 1934, the Hong Kong film industry could hardly be compared to Shanghai's. Shanghai's Star Motion Picture Company 明星, for example, produced over 140 features between its founding in 1922 and the advent of talking films in the mid-1930s. And yet, in the 37 years between the Lumière Brothers' visit to Hong Kong and the introduction of sound, less than 37 dramatic films (both features and shorts) were produced there.¹⁹

The post-sound era presents a totally different picture. From the time talking pictures became the norm in Hong Kong (1933-34), approximately 7,000 motion pictures²⁰ have been produced in the territory's numerous film studios, almost twice as many as in mainland China during the same fifty-year period.²¹ This situation was due, technically, to the introduction of talking films and, politically, to the Nanjing government's New Life Movement. In an effort to stamp out superstition and moral decadence, the KMT banned what had become the bread-and-butter of the Shanghai film industry: ghost stories and martial arts films.²² Tianyi saw the hand-writing on the wall, relocated to Hong Kong, and was the only one among the six major Shanghai studios²³ not on the verge of bankruptcy in 1935. Overnight, dozens of small studios opened in Hong Kong, many of

¹⁸ In the ensuing five decades, over 5,000 Cantonese films have been shot, all but about one hundred of them in Hong Kong, the remainder in the U.S.A., Guangzhou, and Shanghai.

¹⁹ See footnote 11.

²⁰ Unless stated otherwise, all films are dramatic feature-length productions. Throughout this article, statistics for post-1933 Hong Kong films are culled from *Artland* 《藝林》 (Hong Kong, 1937-1941), Cheng *et al.*, *History of the Development*, and the filmographies published in conjunction with the Second, Third, Eighth and Tenth Hong Kong International Film Festivals.

²¹ Statistics gathered from the filmographies in Cheng *et al.*, *History of the Development* and 中國人民解放軍總政治部文化部 [The Cultural Bureau of the Political Bureau of the People's Liberation Army], *Film Handbook* 《電影手冊》 (Peking, 1984), pp. 81-120.

²² *Variety Weekly*, I (1935), 403.

²³ The others: Star 明星, United 聯華, Hsin Hwa 新華, Yi Hwa 藝華, Denton 電通.

them producing a single picture before folding, their aim being to capitalize on the Southeast Asian market. "Audiences just want to see the flash of swords," one critic remarked, "There's no need to spend large amounts on big stars."²⁴ As a result, Hong Kong movies were cheaply produced—and looked it.²⁵

Operas, ghost stories, and martial arts were the staples of Hong Kong cinema until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. "The Shanghai film industry comes to a complete halt," announced Hong Kong's *Screen Weekly* 每週電影 on 27 October 1937. The editorial continued: "We believe this is a chance for us to take up the struggle." The war sent many of Shanghai's leading lights scurrying to the British-controlled enclave. For the first time, Mandarin-dialect films were produced in Hong Kong, directed by such left-wing Shanghai filmmakers as Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生 (*Lone Island Paradise* 孤島天堂, 1939; *The Boundless Future* 前程萬里, 1940) and Situ Huimin 司徒慧民 (*White Clouds of Home* 白雲故鄉, 1940). These movies shared the patriotic theme of "Resist the Japanese", and reflected Hong Kong cinema's increasing involvement with the real world. *The Boundless Future*, for example, is about a driver who is hired by a Hong Kong company which transports munitions for the Japanese. He steadfastly refuses to work, is attacked by hired thugs and thrown into jail. Upon his release he meets a young woman, a refugee from Manchuria who has been forced into prostitution. By the film's end, the two leave Hong Kong and join the resistance in China's interior.

Cantonese-dialect films such as *Life Line* 生命綫 (directed by Guan Wenqing, 1935)²⁶ and *Behind the Shanghai Front Line* 上海火綫後 (directed by Tang Xiaodan, 1938) also reflected a new maturity in Hong Kong films. But film audiences cannot live on realism alone, and for every *Female Soldier* 女戰士 (1938) there was a purely escapist film, like the Busby Berkeley-type musical *Eighth Heaven* 第八天堂 (1938).

Some important Cantonese movie stars emerged during this period: Bai Yan 白燕, one of the most respected leading ladies of Hong Kong cinema, whose career lasted until the late 1960s; and Zhang Ying 張瑛, who with Wu Chufan was one of the two local "kings of the silver screen" through the 1950s—it seems that every production for over two decades featured one of these two stars.

Another popular actress in the late 1930s was Chen Yunshang 陳雲裳, who was such a box office draw that even Shanghai took notice (when its film industry re-emerged in 1938). Chen was recruited by Shanghai's largest studio, Hsin Hwa 新華, in 1939 and after a resounding success in *Mulan Enlists* 木蘭從軍, became the Mandarin-dialect cinema's top star.²⁷

Though Chen Yunshang was the first Hong Kong star to excel in Shanghai-produced Mandarin movies, she had never been as popular in Hong Kong movies

²⁴ *Variety Weekly*, I (1935), 403.

²⁵ Since no films from this period survive, we can only rely upon magazine and newspaper accounts.

²⁶ This is considered the first film to advocate resistance against the Japanese.

²⁷ A poll in Shanghai's *Movie News Weekly* 《電影新聞》 of 16 June 1939 named Chen as the most popular Chinese star and Shirley Temple as the most popular foreign star.

影起五期星日三十月五曆農號十月六曆國

片巨大偉意國愛大偉司公洋南

女戰士

尹海靈 導演
高浪梨 主演

李綺 趙魂
劉亞軍 李丹
顧少英 顧少英
顧少英 顧少英

好鐵要釘
好女要當
好烟要吸
好茶要飲
好飯要吃
好衣要穿
好話要說
好路要走
好人要交
好國要愛

揮刀如切菜
擲彈如擲石
胡虜屈膝降
旗開便得勝
同仇皆稱道
可敬女兒兵




海鏡除

影起日期星日二初月四曆農號一月五曆國

製監會員委事軍央中
片巨抗製攝國務服影攝地國中

抗戰實錄

國出次首人艦德一力實之軍空新國我看請

下中敵吉
沉彈艦油

奇建台轟
動立灣津

企敵特焚
業人島燒

津浦線我軍節節勝利！
不讓倭寇敢空襲我！
我軍大會師迫近杭州！
南京大會戰敵艦炸沉！
我軍大敵敵艦炸沉！
我軍大敵敵艦炸沉！
我軍大敵敵艦炸沉！

南京 徐州 上海 魯南 濟南 煙台 青島 濰縣 濟寧 臨沂 德州 滄州 保定 石家莊 開封 鄭州 許昌 漯河 南陽 襄陽 宜昌 萬縣 重慶 成都 昆明 貴陽 西安 蘭州 西寧 銀川 迪化 哈密 喀什 和田 吐魯番 哈密 迪化 銀川 西寧 蘭州 西安 貴陽 昆明 成都 萬縣 宜昌 襄陽 南陽 漯河 許昌 鄭州 開封 保定 石家莊 德州 濟寧 臨沂 煙台 青島 濰縣 濟南 魯南 徐州 上海 南京

每日
四場
七點正
九點正
十點正
八點正



Publicity literature for anti-Japanese films popular during the Sino-Japanese War.

as her chief rival, Li Qinian 李綺年. Shanghai's Yi Hwa Studio 藝華, Hsin Hwa's biggest competitor, brought Li to Shanghai in 1940 in an effort to topple Chen. Alas, Li's Mandarin was inadequate and after a few productions she was dropped. Never able to regain a foothold in Hong Kong films, Li joined a touring theatre group and committed suicide in Cambodia in 1949 at the age of 35.²⁸

The years 1937 through 1941 saw an unprecedented flow of talent between Shanghai and Hong Kong. There was little forewarning of the desolation that was to occur during the next four years. With the Japanese invasion in December 1941, and the bombing of the Grandview Studio and other film facilities,²⁹ Hong Kong cinema ceased production until early 1946.

The devastation wrought by the Japanese was so complete that it was not until one year after Hong Kong's liberation in August 1945 that the first Hong Kong film of the post-war era, and the first feature film produced in over four years, was released. *Flames of Passion* 情燄 was directed by the veteran Cantonese director Mo Kangshi 莫康時 and starred Wu Chufan. Significantly, *Flames of Passion* was a Mandarin movie. In the late 1940s, numerous Shanghai filmmakers settled in Hong Kong—some fleeing the KMT's "White Terror", others the inflation rampant in China. Hong Kong's Mandarin film industry began to flourish, a trend which peaked in the early 1970s.

The largest studio in the early post-war years was Great China 大中華, which counted among its stars such Shanghai giants as Li Lihua 李麗華, who remained one of Hong Kong's top stars through the 1960s, Zhou Xuan 周璇, who returned to Shanghai after 1949, directors Wu Zuguang 吳祖光, who returned to China and was branded a Rightist in 1957, and Zhu Shilin 朱石麟, whose career flourished in Hong Kong until his retirement in 1964. Many smaller studios proliferated, most significantly the left-wing Yonghua 永華 and Nan Kuen 南群, whose *The Way of Love* 戀愛之道 starred Shu Xiuwen 舒繡文 and Feng Zhe 馮喆, both of whom returned to China after 1949 and died during the Cultural Revolution.

A famous 1930s Hollywood film series which was also produced in Shanghai before the war, and revived in post-war Hong Kong, was "Charlie Chan, the Great Chinese Detective". Pre-war audiences did not perceive the Hollywood-Chinese detective as a derogatory character, but rather as a hero who used his intelligence and logic to outsmart his caucasian counterparts. Character actor Xu Xinyuan 徐莘園, who bore a striking resemblance to Warner Oland, appeared as Charlie Chan in a number of feature films in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including *The Radio Station Murder Case* 播音台大血案 (1939). After a hiatus of five years, Xu continued his Chan portrayal in such Hong Kong productions as *The Net of Justice* 天網恢恢 (1947) and *Charlie Chan Outwits the Black Despot* 陳查禮智鬥黑霸王 (1948).

²⁸Huang Ren et al., 《中國電影電視名人錄》 [A Directory of Chinese Film and Television Celebrities] (Taipei, 1982), p. 229.

²⁹Mei Qi, 《戲劇的人生》 [Theatrical Life] (Hong Kong, 1956), p. 26.



Li Lihua
The Flower Girl (1951)

Cantonese cinema flourished from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, with as many as 200 films produced a year.³⁰ The fecundity of the Cantonese cinema is well-illustrated by the career of Zhou Kunling 周坤玲, the American-born “Technicolour Queen” of Hong Kong motion pictures who starred in 70 movies in 1952-53.³¹ She, like the other Cantonese stars mentioned below, possessed a versatility that has rarely been seen since—within three months she might make an opera film, then a contemporary comedy, then a costume drama, followed by a detective story, and a martial arts action film. Though many of these were cheap productions, called “seven-day wonders” because they were shot in a week, Cantonese cinema often transcended the mediocrity of the opera and martial arts films which were the backbone of the industry. Such studios as Sun Luen 新聯 and Chung Luen 中聯, directors Qin Jian 秦劍 and Li Chenfeng 李晨風, pre-war stars Wu Chufan, Zhang Ying, Bai Yan and new stars Hong Xiannü 紅綫女³² and Fang Yanfen 芳艷芬 (to

³⁰Yu Mo-wan 余慕雲 and Tsang Gar-yin 曾嘉燕, “Filmography of Cantonese Films (1960-1969),” *The Tenth Hong Kong International Film Festival: Cantonese Melodrama 1950-1969* (Hong Kong, 1986), pp. 120-159.

³¹Wu De, “Filmography of Cantonese Films in the 1950s,” *The Second International Film Festival of Hong Kong: Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1950-1959)* (Hong Kong, 1978), pp. 103-188.

³²Hong Xiannü (“Red Line Girl”) caused quite a stir in 1956 when, at the height of her fame, she left Hong Kong for Guangzhou, where she devoted her time to Cantonese opera rather than movies. Harassed during the Cultural Revolution, she was labelled Hei Xiannü 黑綫女 (“Black Line Girl”). Her daughter defected to Taiwan in 1984.

name just a few) produced films of quality, a number of which were adaptations from literary works: *New Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓新夢, which placed the classic Qing-dynasty novel in 1951 Hong Kong; *Everlasting* 天長地久 (1955), Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* set in contemporary Hong Kong and Macao; and *Family* 家 (1953), based on Ba Jin's novel.

Mandarin and Cantonese film circles rarely mixed, and throughout this period it was generally conceded that Mandarin films were of a higher quality. The Mandarin films studios—the left-wing Great Wall 長城 and Feng Huang 鳳凰, the right-wing Motion Picture & General Investment (MP&GI) 電懋 and Shaw Brothers 邵氏—were larger and spent more on their productions. With the liberation of Shanghai in 1949, a new influx of movie personnel arrived in Hong Kong while another group of film-makers returned to China. In no other period was the border between the Shanghai and Hong Kong film worlds more blurred than during the five years from 1947 (when Hong Kong's Mandarin film industry began to flourish) to 1952 (when the remaining privately-run studios in Shanghai were nationalized).³³

Mandarin movies in the 1950s had a diversity conspicuously absent today. From social dramas like *Between Fire and Water* 水火之間 (directed by Zhu Shilin in 1955), in which slum dwellers band together to fight off local thugs, to musicals like *Mambo Girl* 曼波女郎 (MP&GI, 1957), which features the hit song “I Love Cha Cha” 我愛恰恰; from traditional opera films like *The Kingdom and the Beauty* 江山美人 (Shaw Brothers, 1959), to comedies with a social message like *A Night-time Wife* 禁婚記 (Great Wall, 1951), which humorously depicts the problems of working



Zhang Ying and Fang Yanfen



Bai Yan

³³“上海聯合電影製片廠二十日正式成立” [“Shanghai United Film Studio formally established on the 20th”], *People's Daily* (Peking), 25 January 1952, page 3.

A Cantonese movie with Bai Yan and Wu Chufan in 1938.



Some Mandarin films of the 1950s and 1960s.

women in Hong Kong, Mandarin movies had a sheen and polish which, for the most part, Cantonese movies lacked. Hong Kong audiences, by their willingness to see movies in an alien dialect, demonstrated their support for this alternative to the usual Cantonese feature. It is unfortunate that in the 1980s no viable alternative to mainstream Hong Kong cinema exists.

Besides Mandarin and Cantonese films, movies in the Chaozhou and Fujian dialects were also produced. But unlike Mandarin films which had an appeal beyond their specific dialect group, these movies were patronized almost entirely by Hong Kong's Chaozhou and Fujian populations.

The two largest studios in the late 1950s and 1960s were Shaw Brothers and MP&GI. MP&GI's director Loke Wan Tho 陸運濤 loved the cinema and wanted to create films that were both profitable and artistic.³⁴ This is apparent in the high production values and intelligent scripts of such dramas as *Her Tender Heart* 玉女私情 (1959), comedies like *Our Sister Hedy* 四千金 (1957), and thrillers like *Death Trap* 危機重重 (1960).

Shaw Brothers, on the other hand, seemed to pour its money into a few high-budget costume dramas (such as *Empress Wu* 武則天, 1963) in an effort to mimic the Hollywood spectacles popular at the time (i.e., *Cleopatra*). The bulk of their comedies and dramas did little more than follow trends. Though production values were high, Shaw's scripts were of low quality, thus demonstrating the Shaw Brothers' preoccupation with "giving the public what it wants".

The competition between the two studios reached its peak in 1964. When MP&GI announced it was making a film version of the novel *Between Tears and Laughter* 啼笑姻緣, Shaws immediately put all its directors and stars to work on its own version and came out with a finished product over a month ahead of its rival. MP&GI used the same tactics in rushing their own production of the Shaw Brothers-announced project *The Magic Lamp* 寶蓮燈. With Loke's death in a plane crash in 1964, and MP&GI's reorganization as Cathay, Cathay's products became indistinguishable from Shaw's (Cathay eventually closed down in 1972). The market was flooded with films which followed popular trends, and popular taste was perceived as being so conservative that no producer dared risk bankruptcy by experimenting with new genres. The fashion in the mid-1960s was costume opera films in the *huangmei* 黃梅 style, and these were produced en masse until the public abandoned them. Then came the kung-fu craze.

Meanwhile, the left-wing Great Wall and Feng Huang studios, long bastions of quality films with a social message, became indirect victims of the Cultural Revolution. The Hong Kong riots of 1967 scared audiences away from anything that even faintly hinted of communism. The political climate both in Hong Kong and across the border seemed to sap the studios of their creativity. This was compounded by the "defection" of some top stars to other studios (for example, Gao Yuan 高遠 to Shaws) and the retirement of Xia Meng 夏夢, the reigning queen of leftist films since her debut in *A Night-time Wife* in 1951. These studios still exist, now combined under the Sil-Metropole banner, but in the ensuing decades have

³⁴ Interview, Roger Lee, 25 July 1984.

not been able to regain their leading position in the Hong Kong film industry.

Despite the economic and social changes that had taken place in Hong Kong in the 1960s, the content of local films remained nearly identical to that of the 1930s. Audiences began to taper off, though this is most likely not due to the popularization of television (as happened in the West) since movie-going continued to be a prime leisure-time activity in Hong Kong's cramped living environment. Cantonese film production dropped from over 200 films a year in 1960-1963 to 71 films in 1969, 35 in 1970, and only one in 1971.³⁵ That Cantonese films held on as long as they did was due in good measure to the popularity of two young stars, Chen Baozhu 陳寶珠 and Xiao Fangfang 蕭芳芳, who appeared in a series of "youth" films in the late 1960s (for example, together or separately they starred in 58 of the 105 Cantonese movies released in 1967).³⁶

In the early 1970s, Mandarin imports from Taiwan were the rage, with shallow (but "modern") love stories flooding the market. Hong Kong films were produced almost exclusively in Mandarin, with the kung-fu films of Bruce Lee (produced by the new industry giant, Golden Harvest 嘉禾) and the martial arts films by directors Zhang Che 張徹 and King Hu 胡金銓 leading at the box office. A new Cantonese cinema began to emerge after 1973, with *House of 72 Tenants* 七十二家房客, and by 1977 Cantonese productions once again out-numbered Mandarin ones.³⁷ The trend continued, and by the early 1980s virtually every Hong Kong-produced movie was in Cantonese.³⁸

The Hong Kong cinema of the 1970s was an artistic wasteland, with very few productions of either technical or intellectual merit. *The Arch* 董夫人 (1970, directed by Tang Shuxuan 唐書璇, one of Hong Kong's few female directors), and the Hui Brothers' comedies are notable exceptions. Sam and Michael Hui starred in some of the most inventive and original films of the 1970s. Their clever use of Cantonese dialogue played no small part in the revival of Cantonese movies, and their productions ranked among the most lucrative films of the decade: *Games Gamblers Play* 鬼馬雙星, *The Last Message* 天才與白癡, *The Private Eyes* 半斤八兩, and *The Contract* 賣身契 ranked first at the box office in 1974, 1975, 1976, and 1978 respectively.

The 1980s saw a gradual expansion of subject matter and an improvement in technique, but the content of most Hong Kong movies remained trite and unimaginative. Allen Fong 方育平 was the most outstanding director of the early 1980s. His films *Father and Son* 父子情 (1981) and *Ah Ying* 半邊人 (1983) were critical successes, but did poorly at the box office. Less successful was his next

³⁵ Yu Mo-wan and Tsang Gar-yin, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-159; and Zhu Weiwen, "Filmography," *The Eighth Hong Kong International Film Festival: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies* (Hong Kong 1984), pp. 163-166.

³⁶ Yu Mo-wan and Tsang Gar-yin, *ibid.*, pp. 140-142.

³⁷ Zhu Weiwen, "Filmography," pp. 168-177.

³⁸ Actually, films since the mid-1960s are dubbed in both Cantonese and Mandarin versions (the latter for export to Taiwan). Before the mid-1960s, Hong Kong movies were largely shot with sync-sound.



Father and Son, directed by Allen Fong

production, *Just Like Weather* 美國心 (1986), an interesting failure which mixed documentary and dramatic techniques. In this rambling examination of a young Hong Kong married couple, Fong interviewed the husband and wife both separately and together, intercutting the various interviews with dramatizations of their lives.

One of the most remarkable Hong Kong films of the late 1980s is *Gangs* 童黨 (1988), directed by Lawrence Ah Mon 劉國昌. A realistic look at teenage gang members, *Gangs* was the perfect antidote to the spate of gangster films which glorified the triad lifestyle and which came into vogue after the phenomenal box office success of *A Better Tomorrow* 英雄本色 (1986). Unfortunately, *Gangs* also demonstrated the growing heavy-handedness of the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority (TELA), Hong Kong's censors, who insisted on nearly thirty cuts in the film, mostly on the grounds of "triad-related language", though a number of the phrases removed were inventions of the script writers.

TELA had been on the defensive since a 1987 newspaper report revealed that they lacked the legal authority to censor films on the grounds of political content, a practice they had engaged in since the 1950s. Even though the government was informed of this in a secret report in the 1970s, it chose not to change its policies and in recent years appeared to be catering to Peking's whims by banning "sensitive" Taiwan films, such as *The Coldest Winter in Peking* 皇天后土 (1981). Based on



Gangs, directed by Lawrence Ah Mon

a novel about the Cultural Revolution which had been banned in China, *The Coldest Winter* played in Hong Kong cinemas for one day before its license was revoked. Furthermore, movies from Taiwan were not allowed to participate in the annual government-sponsored Hong Kong International Film Festival until 1987, after the legality question had been raised.

What makes Hong Kong films so mediocre? Some point to the commercial nature of the industry, but in other countries this has not precluded the production of occasional classics. Perhaps one major factor is the low expectations of Hong Kong audiences. Another is undoubtedly the lack of courageous and imaginative producers committed to making motion pictures which rise above the lowest common denominator and venture into the realm of art.

It is admittedly frustrating for anyone with a knowledge of Hong Kong's rich cinematic heritage to view the current scene. Despite the territory's relatively high degree of artistic freedom and technical expertise, Hong Kong cinema occupies a distinct third place when compared with the best work coming out of China and Taiwan, with little hope of regaining its former place in the vanguard of Chinese film.