

Film Archive's "Hidden Treasures" features unsung heroes of Hong Kong cinema (with photos)

The Hong Kong Film Archive of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (HKFA) will present "One-Man Entertainment Machine: Chan Cheuk-sang and His United Film" as the launch of the "Hidden Treasures" series, which will recognise neglected forerunners of Hong Kong cinema. Six films that are significant in Chan Cheuk-sang's career as the owner of United Film will be screened on September 1, 8 and 9 at the HKFA Cinema. Post-screening talks will also be arranged for all the screenings.

Chan entered the film industry by accident. He first landed a job at the World Theatre through his elder brother, and then later, by starting a restaurant business, Chan got to know the Kwan Family, who owned several important theatre chains. He then began distributing films for second runs. Chan was active in the 1950s and '60s and owned his film companies United Film and Ngai Sing, producing films financed by the theatre chains. He even took up numerous roles himself, including producing, directing, scriptwriting and shooting film stills, to save on expenses. Chan and his wife Wong May-yee worked closely to operate their film business, which produced and distributed over 200 titles across different film genres. Chan died in 2017 at the age of 95.

The Chinese New Year film "As You Desire" (1952) was Chan's first foray into filmmaking and starred the biggest draws of Cantonese cinema. The film was a blockbuster in Hong Kong and Macao at the time, bringing about a good start for Chan's over 20-year-career in producing. In the story, a miser (Ma Si-tsang) plans to arrange a marriage between his son (Sun Ma Si-tsang) and a rich girl, while an heir (Leung Sing-por) forces her younger sister (Hung Sin Nui) to marry a tycoon. The film is the only existing narrative film starring both Ma and Sun Ma, which makes it a rare gem to witness these two geniuses playing off each other.

Sing-song films were very popular in the '50s, and the genre was a major one produced by United. The contemporary sing-song comedy "Sing Her a Love Song" (1955) features three operatic giants – Sun Ma Si-tsang, Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin – who sing about the struggles in living and love of ordinary folks. Yam and Pak are a lovesick pair in the film and Sun Ma is Yam's ex-schoolmate who entertains the audience with his messiness.

"Ms Chan's Boat Chase" (1955) was made to commemorate the third anniversary of United, and was billed as an "All-Singing Story of the People", enabling the leads Yam and Pak as well as Leung Sing-por to unleash their respective signature operatic skills. The story was adapted from Zhang Henshui's novel "Autumn River" and takes reference to the opera favourite "The Jade Hairpin". Pak falls pregnant with Yam's baby but the duo are forced to separate, leaving Pak to perform on the street with Leung for a living.

The "Headless Empress" series was a remarkable work of United, and also a milestone in the acting career of Yu Lai-zhen. "The Headless Empress Bears a Son, Part 1" (1957) follows the pregnant Empress of East Palace (Yu) who is sent to the guillotine because of the scheming of the evil Empress of West Palace (Fung Wong Nui). Yu gives birth to a baby boy before she dies, and luckily the baby is rescued by a fairy and Yu becomes a ghost to look after her son.

Effects-driven martial arts fantasy surged in the '50s and '60s, but Chan faced constraints in technology and budget. As a result, he drew animation effects himself in "Monkey Saint Raids the Monastery" (1965) to fulfil audiences' expectations for excitement and novelty. The film tells of the schemes of the Spider Demon (Lee Hong-kum), who seduces the Dragon King to steal treasure and teams up with another demon (Yuen Siu-fai) to capture a monk – an action that puts the life of the powerful Money King (Yu Kai) at risk.

Sun Ma Si-tsang starred in Chan's first production, and Sun Ma's last film as the lead, "The Scores" (1969), was directed by Chan. With Tina Ti as the female lead, the film seems to be an erotic work but, by nature, is not lascivious. The story uncovers offences associated with pornography and money in society through the characters' experiences in job seeking and romance.

All films are in Cantonese and without subtitles.

Tickets priced at \$45 are now available at URB TIX (www.urbtix.hk). For credit card telephone bookings, please call 2111 5999. For programme enquiries, please call 2739 2139 or visit www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/HKFA/en_US/web/hkfa/programmesandexhibitions/2018ht-ccs/index.html.



