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Chang Cheh's Directorial Journey

by Wong Yan

In the world of the Chinese movie-making industry, Chang Cheh is probably the most often-criticized director, including among his detractors the left wing -- who attacks him intentionally -- the other directors who make up stories about him out of jealousy and pettiness, and even the media -- that alternately makes unreasonable, justified, objective, and conservative criticisms -- but Chang Cheh delivered Chinese movies from genius scholars and beautiful girls -- heavily bent on a females and females-crossdressing-as-males sort of soft feminine cinema -- to male-centric, macho type hard guy movies, which is an accomplishment that can't be ignored. Moreover these Chinese movies brought us Wang Yu, David Chiang, Ti Lung, Chan Kwun Tai [Chen Kuan Tai], Lo Leet [Lo Lieh], Fu Sheng, etc., who are male actors that are widely popular all over the world. This contribution is incomparable.

BELONGING AMONG THE WORLD'S FAMOUS DIRECTORS

Although Chang Cheh didn't get recognized at the famous Cannes Film Festival in Europe like King Hu did, he was awarded Best Director at the International Asian movie festival, and he was also listed in the Who's Who in the world's movie directors category in England and Japan. As a representative Chinese director, his films were praised by British, French, and Japanese film critics, so it can be said that he is as famous as King Hu among the world's international cinemas.

Numerous articles have been written discussing Chang Cheh's accomplishments in many magazines and newspapers, but how did Chang Cheh succeed? What types of trials and tribulations did he overcome? These are things that nobody else mentioned. The author of this article has been acquainted with Chang Cheh for many years. From memory, summarizing his experiences working as a director, or should I say his long arduous learning experience, maybe this will be of some research value for fans of Chang Cheh.

VICTORY AND REUNIFICATION OF THE COUNTRY AND FIRST JOINING THE MOVIE BUSINESS

Chang Cheh's real name is Chang Yi Yang. He is originally from Jit Kong, Ching Teen city, born on February 10th, '12 of Republic of China. His father's name is Chang Au, middle-named Bing Larn. Chang Cheh was a soldier and also in politics. During the war against Japan (WWII), he followed his fellow refugee students to the inland area. He attended Middle School in Szechuan, and later joined the social task force under the Department of Education as a Captain. After this, he joined the cultural work organization under Cheung Do Farn and Yu Kwun Tse as a special member. Chang Cheh's accomplishments in the movies are deeply influenced by these two senior-ranking officers who acted as both friends and teachers to him. After the victory and the reunification of the country, he followed Cheung Do Farn back to Shanghai. They took over the theaters and cultural department that had been under Japanese control, and became their business managers; besides showing movies, he also often performed modern drama and classical "ping" drama. Because Cheung Do Farn was the honorary director of the [Cathay \[aka Kwok Tai\]](#) movie company, all of the movies shown in the cultural organization were products of the Cathay movie studio and the Tai Tung movie studio. Because of this, Chang Cheh became very well-acquainted with the actual owners of the Cathay and Tai Tung film studios, the Lau Chung Ho and Lau Chung Leung brothers. He soon became a part-time planner for the Lau brothers.

Looking at it this way, Chang Cheh's involvement with the movie business started even earlier than that of King Hu and Lee Horn Cheung. The person who influenced him the most at that time was the director of "Springtime of a Small Town," Fai Mu, who was the best director in China in [the 40's \[in American years\]](#). Chang Cheh had the utmost respect for him, and he also benefitted a lot from his associations with him. Chang Cheh's knowledge of the classical "ping" drama also had its roots in this period.

THE FIRST SCRIPT, "GIRL BEHIND A MASK"

In the 36th year of the Republic of China, Chang Cheh wrote a script for the Cathay film company called "Girl Behind a Mask," which was directed by Fong Pui Lum and starred Koo Lan Kwun, Yim Far. Parts of the movie were shot in the vicinity of Tai Pei and Tam Sui. It was the first Mandarin movie

that featured exterior scenes in Taiwan. All the interior scenes were done back in the Cathay film studio at Shanghai and it was shown on screens right after it was finished. It created quite a stir when it premiered both in Shanghai and Taiwan. One of its songs, "Strange Love," has been popular for over twenty years. The success of that movie made a lot of film companies in Shanghai eager to make movies over here in Taiwan. Chang Cheh's actual involvement in film production started with "Girl Behind a Mask." Naturally, he was doing this in an amateurish manner. The main male character of the movie, Yim Far, was David Chiang's father, so one could say that David Chiang and Chang Cheh are old family acquaintances.

MAKING "THE INCIDENT AT AH LI SHAN" AT TAIWAN

"The Incident at Ah Li Shan" (also known as "The Story of Ng Fung") was Chang Cheh's second script. He co-directed the movie with Chang Ying. (Chang Ying was already officially a movie director at the Cathay film company, having previously directed "Traces of Her in the Abandoned Garden.") It was Chang Cheh's directorial debut. He was still twenty-six then, and he relied solely on his experience watching movies and drama -- which make his accomplishments all the more impressive. The movie was financed by the head of the Cathay movie company, who was the famous director from the 40's, Tsui Yun Fu. If Chang Cheh didn't have the talent and ability to perform, an experienced movie maker like Tsui Yun Fu would not have entrusted him to do the job.

Tsui Yun Fu originally planned to start a new movie industry in Taiwan. On the one hand, he would run the business of the Cathay movie company in Taiwan. On the other hand, he'd organize the filming of "The Incident at Ah Li Shan" by the Man Jeung movie company. The outdoor scene team was led by Chang Cheh and arrived at Taiwan in the winter of the 37th year of the Republic of China, but filming didn't commence till June in the 38th year of the Republic of China. The film's many actors included Lee Ying, Ng Ging Ming, Lee Gwor, Lam Teen Hung, Chang Sui, Tsang Wun (the former wife of Chang Ying), Chang Si Si (the former wife of Lam Teen Hung), Chiu Ming, Chow Lam Ping, Pang Sai Wai, Tsui Wing, etc. Most of them were actors employed by Cathay. When they arrived in Taiwan, Shanghai was lost to the communists. Most of the filming equipment did not make it out of the city on time. This almost brought filming to a complete halt. Also, the outdoor scenes took up two-thirds of the movie. The actual "Ah Li Shan" had trees that are too tall, and the hill was too steep, making lighting a big

problem -- the result of cameras back in those days being quite poor. Finally, the large song and dance scenes required a lot of **temporary actors [extras]**, and they are simply not available in Ah Li Shan. Because of this, the project was put on hold for more than half a year before finally recommencing in Fa Lian. That was the first Mandarin film made in Taiwan, and it was well-received by critics when finally released. Chang Cheh got to meet with president Chang Kai Shek personally because of this.

Because of the situation in mainland China, Mandarin movies lost the mainland market, and movie making was made even more difficult due to the shortage of equipment. Chang Cheh lived in Tsui Yun Fu's house for two years, and he finally wrote another script: "We Will Never be Apart." It was made by the previous <19> incarnation of the Chinese movie studio, the Lung Kow movie company. Tsui Yun Fu was the director, and filming commenced on July of the 40th year of the Republic of China.

JOINING WORK FOR ANTI-COMMUNIST FILMMAKING

Chang Cheh and other members of the movie industry were forced to work on plays because of the lack of actual movies being made. On April 29th of the 39th year of the Republic of China, the Chinese movie and drama society was inaugurated. Under the call of the president to aid the starving citizens in mainland China, they performed "Pictures of Starving Citizens," and Chang Cheh was the director. On November 1st of **the same year [1950 in American years]**, **the specialist magazine, "Movie and Drama Battlelines"** began publication. **Chang Cheh was its founder**, and the contributing authors were all first-class writers. Eventually, he worked for the chief political department, and he worked as the Chief of Staff at the anti-communist/anti-Russia drama association founded by Woo Wai Huck. He directed several big productions such as "Au Chin's Reclaiming His Kingdom" and "Genghis Khan," which were all very well received. He also acted as vice chairman of the Chinese experimental drama group of the Department of Education, and lecturer in drama at the school for political officials. The current professor of drama was a student of his, back in those days. Those were the glory days of Taiwan drama back then. Although there are other factors, Chang Cheh was the main reason for the "Golden Age" of Taiwanese drama on the stage.

MEETING LEE MEI AND GOING TO HONG KONG TO MAKE MOVIES

At around the 45th year of the Republic of China, the freelance movie workers in Hong Kong formed a group to visit Taiwan for the first time. Tsui Yun Fu's old friend, Fung Ming Yuen, the owner of Hong Kong's Wah Ming company, was one of those people. He invited Tsui Yun Fu to direct a movie for him. The main actress was Lee Mei. Tsui Yun Fu recommended Chang Cheh to write the script. Originally titled "Love at the Sun and Moon Lake," the name was changed to "The Heart of a lover, the Heart of a Wolf." It's a detective story. During the course of filming the movie, Chang Cheh often joined in with the crew at work on location. The main actress, Lee Mei, admired Chang Cheh's talents and genius, so she personally financed, out of her own pocket, the movie "Wildfire" which was to be made by her own production company, the North Star company. Not only was Chang Cheh hired to write the script, he was also invited to go to Hong Kong to direct the movie. Chang Cheh arrived in Hong Kong in mid-November of the 46th year of the Republic of China. Originally, the movie was scheduled to start shooting at the end of November, but Lee Mei suddenly had to attend the "Hing Heen" Expo convention in Bangkok. When she finally returned from Bangkok, due to contractual obligations with the International film company, she had to act in International's new film, "Winning Both the Money and the Beauty." So after one delay after another, the filming finally commenced in Wing Wah studios after more than half a year. Lee Mei's original plan was to invite Wong Kok from Taiwan as the main male actor, but due to the delay, Wong Kok had to make "Long Road to Victory" in Italy and didn't have time to come to Hong Kong, so they used Ko Yuen of the Sun Wah film company, instead. That also affected the making of the movie. "Wildfire" was about a woman who, [due to physical and environmental influences, hated all males \[because of her upbringing and past experiences, hated men\]](#). This type of personality is very suitable to Lee Mei's style of performance, and she was very popular, due to her role in "Spring is Gone," so theoretically her own production of "Wildfire" should also have been a hit, but the film did extremely poorly at the box office, and it didn't get screened in certain regions. The brief affair between Chang Cheh and Lee Mei also ended because of this.

STRANDED IN HONG KONG, WRITING FOR A LIVING

Because of his failure at the movies, Chang Cheh felt ashamed to return to Taiwan to face his family and friends, so he preferred to stay in Hong Kong and make his living as a writer instead of going back to Taiwan and getting a government job. Due to connections -- at that time China film company was under reorganization -- there were actual opportunities, but Chang Cheh's pride wouldn't let him do that. Most of the movie people who didn't make it in Hong Kong simply returned to Taiwan, but Chang Cheh stayed in Hong Kong for eleven years. He wouldn't return to Taiwan until after his "One Armed Swordsman" and "The Assassin" made him famous in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, where he finally returned in triumph, accompanied by Wang Yu, on his vacation.

While he was working as a writer in Hong Kong, he wrote film reviews for several newspapers, because the income from being a film critic is limited, which was only enough to pay for cigarettes and tea. Meal money and rent were paid by writing martial arts novels. In addition to that, even though Chang Cheh was living in Hong Kong, he still thought about Taiwan, so besides writing film reviews and martial arts novels, **he wrote a column for the United Newspaper of Taiwan, writing under the pseudonym of Tsum See.** Legend has it that he had to write almost 10,000 words a day, and he spent months and years being sleep-deprived. As a writer, Chang Cheh is a real iron man. Not only is he well-read and well-educated, he also has a photographic memory, and he kept absorbing new materials, so he not only made a name for himself as **Ho Kwun (another pseudonym he used when writing film reviews for the Hong Kong newspaper),** but his later employment at the Shaw Brother's studio was due to Run Run Shaw's recognition of his talent from reading his reviews; his column in Taiwan's United newspaper was also an excellent read. No matter whether the subject was "ping" drama, movie, or script writing, what he wrote all made perfect sense. He suggested that the way to save Chinese movies was to use macho "Yang" films to replace feminine "Yin" films. The idea of saving Chinese movies this way originated from this period. Unfortunately, this didn't raise the awareness of the rich and powerful movie moguls, and he had to prove it himself in the end. And it changed the progress of Chinese filmmaking. Some people consider his "Macho Yang rhetoric" as a way to excuse his martial arts movies, but actually, he is just true to his words. If Chang Cheh

was to collect all his previous writings for various newspapers and publish it, I think it would definitely help audiences understand his work better.

THE CHANCE TO CHANGE, WITH "SPEECHLESS TO ASK GOD"

One of the two major movie companies in Hong Kong, the International film company, was reorganized as the Deen Mou company while Chang Cheh was making "Wildfire." When Chang Cheh was working as a writer, the Deen Mou company would collect many scripts from all over the place, and when there were filmable scripts, they will hire Chang Cheh to rewrite them. This not only took care of his daily expenses, but his writing skills are indeed superior; the filmmakers were always happy with the scripts resulting from his rewrites, so they hired him to write the script for "Speechless to Ask God." The script was very moving, so good fortune finally shined on Chang Cheh. After it was made into a movie starring Yau Mum, it was critical hit, so he was hired formerly as a scriptwriter. Not long after Chang Cheh started his work for Cathay, the owner of the Shaw Brothers studio, Run Run Shaw, who was very impressed by his movie reviews, invited Chang Cheh for a personal meeting. After they met, he was even more impressed by his talents and genius, and he also discovered what a good job he did with the script of "Speechless to Ask God," so he paid a lot of money to hire him as the head of the script-writing department, so it could be said that he stole Chang Cheh away from Deen Mou, but scripting contracts were all based on individual scripts, and there were no strict rules, so Chang Cheh felt no guilt for switching jobs.

BECOMING ESTABLISHED AFTER FIVE-AND-A-HALF FEATURES

In the 51st year of the Republic of China, even though Chang Cheh was working for the Shaw studios script department, his career path was still bumpy. He wrote two different scripts at that time. One is the "Yellow Blossom Tune" musical "Adventure of the Two Phoenixes," directed by Chow See Yuen. The other is a detective mystery directed by Ho Mung Wah called "Bloodstained Flower Tears." Neither film was a success, so he was in a rush to direct his own scripts. In his second year of tenure, he started directing his own scripts with "The Butterfly Cup." After filming over half of the film, Run Run Shaw was dissatisfied with the results and burned the

negatives. He hired Yuen Chow Fung as co-director and the film was finally finished.

Even though the results of Chang Cheh's directorial efforts were lacking, Run Run Shaw still considered him talented in script writing, so he arranged for him to work with Tsui Chung Wung, having Chang Cheh plan the movie and rewrite the scripts, while Tsui Chung Wung directed. Tsui Chung Wung used his background as a photographer to make up for Chang Cheh's weakness in cinematography, and using the old Kung Fu movies as a blueprint, they made "Gong Wu Kay Hup"/"Strange Hero of the Martial World," "Yin Yeung Gim Hup"/"The Swordfighting Couple," "Yuk Meen Fei Wu"/"Jade-Faced Flying Fox," "Sun Gim Jun Gong Wu"/"Mighty Sword that Shocked the Martial world," "Kum Gim Yun Sou"/"Gratitude and Revenge, Lute and Sword," etc. -- which were all box office successes -- together, but Tsui Chung Wung became a famous director while Chang Cheh languished in obscurity behind the screen. In the 53rd year of the Republic of China, Chang Cheh ended his partnership with Tsui Chung Wung with his, "Tiger Boy," for which he both wrote the script and directed. At the same time, he trained various kung fu actors such as Wang Yu, Lo Leet, Chang Lay, Chan Hung Leet, etc., and made "The Magnificent Trio," "The Trail of the Broken Blade," and "The One-armed Swordsman" -- a total of five and a half films. Chang Cheh finally made a name for himself as a director after this.

In the 55th year of the Republic of China, "The One-armed Swordsman" was released to screens in Hong Kong. It broke all box office records and made over a million HK dollars. Chang Cheh became the "million dollar director" and turned his fortunes around. His ten years of bad luck in Hong Kong were finally over. The company began treating him very well. Lee Hon Cheung and King Hu's departure was also a factor. Chang Cheh used the opportunity to go even further, and his work got more and more mature along the way. In the 56th year of the Republic of China, his new contract was \$20,000 (HK) per movie, and he had to make at least 3 movies each year. In '59 of the Republic of China, his new contract was \$30,000 (HK) per movie and he had to make at least 4 movies a year.

DIFFICULT TIMES AND HARD WORK FINALLY REWARDED

Chang Cheh's directorial journey has been difficult with a lot of twists and turns, especially when it comes to his experience as a director, which has a

painful past. A proverb says, "Failure is the mother of Success." Maybe this is the basis of his success later on in life. He said, "My journey as a director was full of twists and turns; it was not a 'flat' road for me. Let's not mention those bits and pieces of 'minor works.' When I finally decided to be a director, I was already over forty years old. The subjects of all my hard work are no longer such big problems or obstacles now, for instance: using males as the main protagonist, using new actors, not using pretty faces, not having happy endings, letting the main character die, even using simple titles that have only two or three words. Back when I first started, every single one of those things were under intense pressure and scrutiny, and it was in the middle of a lot of criticisms and sarcasm, which I managed to get it done with hard work."

The "over forty years old" mentioned by Chang Cheh refers to the period -- '52 of the Republic of China (1963) -- in which he directed the "Butterfly Cup" for the Shaw Brothers studio. The minor works prior to that refer to "The Incident at Ah Li Shan" and "Wildfire," both of which are not even worth mentioning, comparatively.

LEARNING FROM THE STRENGTHS OF OTHERS TO MAKE UP FOR HIS OWN WEAKNESSES

Although Chang Cheh and King Hu are both directors of Kung Fu movies who had Taiwanese roots, because they came from different backgrounds, have different personalities, and different ways of doing things, we can say they each have their own strengths, but King Hu had assisted Lee Hong Cheung and Yim Chun, working as their assistant director and/or secretary, and he also acted, so he had spent some time studying the physical properties of the films used in movies and editing. We can say he was very experienced in the process of filmmaking, but Chang Cheh never attended a film school, and he also had never been an assistant director or a director's secretary. Then, where did he acquire his skills as a director? According to the author's guess, most of it was from observing with his own eyes, besides absorbing the techniques of action sequences in U.S. and Japanese films (especially those of Arthur Penn and Sam Peckinpah; and selected works by Akira Kurosawa and Hiroshi Inagaki), and combining it with Chinese culture. The other part was from observing at the actual film sets, when other people are making movies. When editing, he would pay a lot of attention, studying what they were doing. When he watched other people make movies in Shanghai, he was learning the basic skills, and when he watched other people make

movies in Hong Kong, he was learning from the strengths of others to make up for his own weaknesses/shortcomings. Rumor has it that while he was watching other people make movies, he was shooed away by them, but people are not born knowing everything -- one must learn to acquire the knowledge. Being willing to learn is nothing to be ashamed of; what's shameful is that some Taiwanese directors, satisfied with their own limits, refused to learn, and therefore never improved. Chang Cheh's style may be a little broad and careless, but he is very careful when watching movies. This aspect can be seen clearly in the movie reviews he wrote. Many famous directors from other countries made their fame by learning the strengths of others. This is how they became better.

Chang Cheh's personality has both good and bad points -- just as his work is not absolutely perfect -- which is normal. Even though Chang Cheh often quarreled with old friends and stopped associating with them, as outsiders, we cannot blame that on Chang Cheh. Forming the Long Bow film company -- where he employed a lot of old friends from Taiwan -- and helping a lot of old Taiwanese friends during the years in which he worked at the Shaw brother's studio are both examples demonstrating that he had never forgotten his roots and that old acquaintances are important to him. At the same time, Chang Cheh never hid his bad character traits, which is also proof that he is a humble man. He once criticized his work: "'The Magnificent Trio' was adapted from a Japanese movie. There was only the trio in the movie. There wasn't any city at the border." [The Chinese title for "The Magnificent Trio" is "The Three Heroes at the Border Town." While the three heroes can be summed up as the trio, the border town bit was not in the movie.] When a person is humble he can improve himself. If one doesn't forget his roots, then he will be successful in the future. Let's hope Chang Cheh takes care of himself, and creates an even brighter future for Taiwanese films.

[P.S.: I consider this article a "fluff" piece. Most of the author's comments are pretty much bullshit and a waste of time. The only interesting things are the childhood and early history of Chang Cheh.]

[While I see your point, I find the article to be a breath of fresh air insofar as it is a complimentary, fan-boy-ish take on the man that accentuates his accomplishments rather than his excesses, failures, and decline. As such, it makes up for a lot of other critics' more jaundiced takes on Chang Cheh's oeuvre.]