

# Singapore Sidebar: Erotic Cinema

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## SIFF SIDEBAR: EROTIC CINEMA OF LI HAN HSIANG AND CHU YUAN

The legendary directors, Li Han Hsiang and Chu Yuan, made chamber period films in the 1970s for the Shaw Studios in Hong Kong, helmed by the famous Shanghainese brothers Run Run and Runme. Those of us who lived through this period would remember it as prolific time of Hong Kong-made erotica.

Films such as the 1973 *Illicit Desire* (Li Han Hsiang), which featured nudity, were routinely advertised in cinema trailers but were never shown intact. Singapore International Film Festival assembled several landmark erotic works from this period and showed them in the city for the first time on film, and uncut.

The *Chinese Courtesan* films, a gentler but more fatalistic vision of producer Runme Shaw, began with Chu Yuan's first pugilistic - erotic masterpiece, *Intimate Confessions Of A Chinese Courtesan* (1972).

It is the story of an older woman, Lady Chun, who loves her younger charge, Ai Nu (played with cold, distant sexual charisma by Lily Ho, one of Shaw's beauty legends). This was Hong Kong's first film with lesbianism as its theme. Chu Yuan pulls out all the stops in this film and the melding of the martial arts and erotic film is near perfect. As the madam of a brothel, Lady Chun hates men but kidnaps young girls to work as prostitutes for her.

When Ai Nu (literally translated as love slave) is introduced to the brothel, Lady Chun is attracted by her defiance, and sees herself in her. Ai Nu is subsequently deflowered by four rich old men in various exotic acts. None of this is shown explicitly and the camera freeze-frames the action before it begins. What is shown explicitly is the idea of violent love. Lady Chun licks the blood off AINU's whipped back and AINU later repays that by cutting off her arm. The love is violent because it is never reciprocated. Instead she carries on a lesbian affair with Lady Chun in the hope that she can one day exact her revenge, for being forced into prostitution.

Giving support is veteran actor Yueh Hwa, who plays the naive investigator who is always outwitted by AINU's wily feminine charms. In many ways, while the film seems to portray a man's world of pleasure, the dramatic intensity comes from the women's world of passion, which the male characters can't seem to penetrate.

The film has been so compelling and mesmerising that Chu Yuan actually remade the film in 1984, this time in Cantonese, titled *Lust For Love Of A Chinese Courtesan*. The director is in his element (remember that Chu Yuan's famous *House Of 72 Tenants* in 1973 was the Hong Kong film industry's return to a predominantly Cantonese-dialect cinema) with the fragile and beautiful Taiwanese-born Hu Kuan Chen who plays Ai Nu.

Candice Yu On On (the former Mrs Chow Yuen-Fatt) plays Lady Chun and is believably vulnerable and lonely. The eroticism in the remake is more highly charged than in the original. For instance, the seduction of Ai Nu by Lady Chun in the bathing pool has a more intense sense of domination and eroticism from the older woman, who, ironically, will be subsumed by Ai Nu. The music score and lilting Cantonese song create the pervading mood of utter desolation, loneliness and also impending death.

The vast output of sex films - modern or period - dating from the '60s -'70s till now, many of them badly made and forgettable, did, however, contribute to an Asian world view of sex, from themes of voyeurism, foot fetishism, to female homosexuality, especially in the *Courtesan* and *Golden Lotus* series. In today's amoral world, they do seem mild and a little quaint, especially the ancient obsession with small, bound feet and their "fragrant" smell!

*The Golden Lotus* (1974) by the illustrious and better-known Li Han Hsiang is an adaptation of the sexually explicit Sung dynasty novel *Ching Ping Mei*. Hu Chin and Tien Ni play the female leads: the former as the seductive, Pan Jinlian (Lotus Pan) and the latter as Ping Er, an equally sexually diabolical counterfoil

to Jinlian. The film runs through the gamut of sexual desire but is ultimately a reminder that unbridled passion is self-destructive.

There had been earlier adaptations of this famous novel but Li's 1974 film remains the definitive interpretation. Earlier in 1955, the controversial Manchurian-born Japanese actress Li Xianglan (Yoshiko Yamaguchi) had played Pan and, in 1963, the role was taken by the lovely Diana Chang in a version titled *Amorous Lotus Pan* directed by Chow See Luk. Li himself re-made it several times, including the forgettable *The Golden Lotus: Love And Desire* (1991).

Hong Kong New Wave director, Clara Law (*Farewell, China*), re-interpreted the Golden Lotus classic in the socio-sexual-political allegory, *Reincarnation Of The Golden Lotus* (1989). This modern version, with Law's liberal doses of feminist sensibility, has the sensual and willowy Wong Jo-yin (Joey Wang) as object of men's desire. Reincarnated from the Sung Dynasty to Mao's Cultural Revolution, she eventually comes to Hong Kong as a refugee and meets several men who are reincarnations of previous lovers, including Xi Meng Chin.

The constant remakes of *Golden Lotus* bear testament to the fertile literary source of the film. They also suggest how Li's erotic films may be seen within his mastery of the epic and chamber period film. They are extensions of his interest in literary material. Like the Italian master, Pier Paolo Pasolini (retrospected in SIFF 2003), Li also drew from the *Decameron*; hence, he also went on to make the literary *Dream Of The Red Chamber* (1977).

Li's other classic erotic film is *Sinful Confession* (1974). With comedian Michael Hui in one of his early roles, *Sinful Confession* has Li at his most self-indulgent and brims with dark humour: at one point, Li has Hui as the victim of a gang rape. The film also portrays what Hong Kong cinema was like in the '70s - sex films that gave way to comedy. As Hong Kong critic Sek Kei observed: "Only Michael Hui's popular comedies could somehow offset the prevalence of sex and violence in Hong Kong cinema of the '70s: But what these films did in the end was to unveil the erotic tradition in Chinese literature."

### **LI HAN HSIANG (1926-1996)**

This prolific director made over 70 feature films and played a key role in establishing Hong Kong cinema after the war. He studied at the National Arts Institute in Beijing until he was expelled for political reasons. Li moved to Hong Kong in 1948 and began working in promotions. Later he worked in films in various capacities until making his directorial debut in 1952. Three years later, Li began directing for Shaw Brothers and specialised in elaborate costume dramas such as *Empress Wu*. He moved to mainland China in the early '80s and resumed making costume dramas such as *Empress Dowager*. He also published four volumes of his memoirs.

### **CHU YUAN [CHOR YUEN] (1934-)**

Born in 1934 in Guangzhou, the son of veteran actor Zhang Huo-you. In his desire to make films, Chu Yuan began his career as a scriptwriter in 1956 and added directing to his resume in 1957. Upon being signed by the Shaw Brothers in 1971, his first project at Shaw's was *Duel For Gold*. Critical acclaim came with his feature film, *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* and through his role in writing and directing the hugely popular 1973 version of the landmark comedy, *The House Of 72 Tenants*. However, it was magnificent martial arts movies and superlative swordplay films that brought him fame, especially in his collaborations with the *wu xia* genre's most renowned.

## **Author Information**

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