

# The Irresistible Rise of Asian Cinema 1

By Gerald Pratley

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## PRODUCTION ACTIVITY

It was not so many years ago it seems when speaking of motion pictures from Asia meant Japanese films as represented by Akira Kurosawa and films from India made by Satyajit Ray. But suddenly time passes and now we are impressed and immersed in the flow of films from Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, South Korea, the Philippines, with Japan a less significant player, and India and Pakistan more prolific than ever in making entertainment for the mass audience. No one has given it a name or described it as "New Wave," it is simply Asian Cinema -- the most exciting development in filmmaking taking place in the world today.

In China everything is falling apart yet it manages to hold together, nothing works yet it keeps on going, nothing is ever finished or properly maintained, and yes, here time does wait for every man. But as far as art and industry are concerned, it is an awakening giant! The Shanghai Film Studios are a small world of their own -- a reflection of what China is today. They are reputedly the best among the country's 15 studio lots, including Beijing and Changchun. The August 1st Studio in Beijing makes good use of the Army as extras -- as the Canadian *Bethune* discovered when it filmed there.

The studios in Shanghai are about five miles from downtown in a pleasant suburban district. It takes 45 minutes by taxi crawling through the dense crowds and traffic of all descriptions. Like all studios worldwide, it looks old, rough and ready, a quiet and dusty place among trees and flowers. The courteous press attache, Thomas Tang, showed us around. Several popular entertainments occupied the five stages. The average salaries are Y300 a month (the official average wage in China) more if they work on foreign co-productions, and the studio has a number of actors on long-term contracts.

Films are usually made between Spring and Autumn, as it is after the Chinese New Year that studio heads (studios in general, not just Shanghai) receive the decisions of the Government censor board as to which scripts are considered suitable for production. Because studios were forced in the past to make so many government-approved subjects the public was not interested in paying to see, the managers decided to rent their facilities to independent producers making co-productions with Taiwan and Hong Kong. They are given more latitude by the Government as long as they are not blatantly critical of government practises and policies. A good example is *Farewell My Concubine* produced at Peking Film Studio but financed by the Hong Kong affiliate of a Taiwan film company. The director was Chen Kaige, originally from mainland China and now a US resident. While the script was approved for shooting, as was the finished film, it was only after the Cannes hoopla that the Chinese government decided to take a look at it again -- because the "foreigners" liked it so much!

But co-productions have led to enormous problems; with films being made in the studio and out on location the facilities demanded by Hong Kong and the Taiwanese producers make it difficult for the Chinese studios to comply, resourceful though they are. Difficulties also arise over language. There is no problem with the Taiwanese who speak Mandarin, but most Hong Kong filmmakers speak only Cantonese. While some do try to speak Mandarin it is with a heavy accent hard to understand. In Shanghai Film Studios recording studio, terribly old-fashioned compared to Hong Kong and the West, the technician proudly showed us the first and only Dolby installation in China -- one of the earliest models.

As elsewhere in China, formerly directors were under contract to Shanghai Studios, which turns out 15 to 20 films a year. Annual production in the whole of China runs around 150 to 200 features of which the greater number are simple, popular stories for the masses, action movies, historical dramas, romances -- many influenced by Hong Kong films; the engine driving all Chinese-language movies today. Taiwan has a small industry of its own, but its cinemas are dominated by Hong Kong films dubbed into Mandarin, and US movies.

The irony for movie buffs visiting China is that mainland films were hard to find in Shanghai's hundreds of cinemas; they were filled with HK "pops" and foreign thrillers which the government mostly passes without

too much interference. The mainland Chinese try to make their own action films but Hong Kong's are slicker and generally preferred. Many are shot in the mainland itself (where locations are more plentiful and labour cheaper) by popular HK directors like Tsui Hark, Raymond Lee and Cory Yuen. Zhang Yimou (who photographed Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*) had just started a new period drama *To Live*, with his favourite actress, Gong Li, on location some 50 miles from the studio. Zhang has worked his way up through the ranks directing well-received "art movies" like *Red Sorghum*, *Judou*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *The Story of Qiu Ju*. In selling these films abroad, producers and studios are now allowed to by-pass the China Film Export & Import Corp., but most are woefully ill-equipped in language ability and business acumen to do so. Although CFE is not much good at it either, most observers expect China Film to continue in its traditional role for some time to come.

However, a recent trend, mostly for co-productions with serious themes, has been for foreign sales agents to handle international business. If the majority co-producer is from Hong Kong, Taiwan or Japan, this ensures the negative will stay outside China, thus making it possible for the West to see difficult or "banned" works like Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (secretly taken to Cannes) or Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (shown at Locarno) much to the Chinese government's disapproval -- at home as well as abroad. *The Blue Kite*, possibly the most impressive among the new films, tells the dramatic and moving story of an ordinary family living through fifty years of social and political changes in China.

Other successes overseas have been Xie Fei's *The Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, John Zhang's *Consuming Sun*, Han Gang's *Grandpa Ge*, Hou Hsiao Hsien's *The Puppetmaster*, and Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, the latter financed from Taiwan and shot in New York City.

Films like these are mostly discovered at festivals and purchased by distributors for specialised showings throughout Europe, Australasia and North America -- where the most money is likely to be made. The Vancouver Film Festival is noted for its detailed and comprehensive Asian Cinema programs, with London, Locarno, and Toronto also giving large representations and retrospectives. Much of what the outside world has learned and discovered about Asian filmmaking is the result of the knowledgeable writing and cinema-going of Derek Elley in London and Hong Kong, David Overby in Toronto and Paris, and Tony Rayns in Vancouver and London.

Few films from other Asian countries are to be found in Shanghai's cinemas or elsewhere in China: the Philippines, for example, has a reasonable rate of production, but few festival entries since Lino Brocka died; South Korea makes around ten a year and had a recent success at festivals with Park John-Won's *Our Twisted Hero*; Vietnam has a small industry making films again; Thailand has a large and popular industry; Malaysia and Indonesia are continuously active; only Singapore has no production. Burma's small industry is stagnant, suppressed by its military dictatorship. And all look towards Hong Kong with admiration mixed with envy.

In the small, densely populated Hong Kong the rate of production is astounding with some 120-150 films being turned out each year, almost all of them made on location. The once famous studios of the Shaw Bros. led by Sir Run Run Shaw in Clearwater Bay across the harbour is almost an hour's drive east of the city amid the rolling hills and tranquil, thinly populated countryside known as the New Territories. It could be mistaken for MGM's old forecourt, while the symbol on the gate reminds one of the Warner Bros. famous shield. It is a fully serviced studio complete with a block of flats that once housed an army of contract players. But few feature-length films are made here today. The many still standing sets are rented almost exclusively by independent producers of television programs, including TVB partly owned by Sir Run Run. Once dominant in film production, with offices in Los Angeles and London until the late 70s, and the publisher of two monthly magazines about the many films he produced, he is now a reclusive, little seen figure. The company which challenged him is Golden Harvest run by Raymond Chow, who also maintains a company in Los Angeles (it financed *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* -- among others). Set up in the early 70s, very much on its success with Bruce Lee, Golden Harvest would never have prospered without him. Run Run Shaw and Chow became deadly enemies because Chow was Sir Run Run's right-hand man for many years until he 'defected' to set up his own company and put Bruce Lee under contract. The massive success of the Lee films followed by those of Jackie Chan and others, helped to keep Golden Harvest in business, along with a smart, ruthlessly administered business policy and a more international outlook than Shaw

Bros. ever had.

The Golden Harvest studios are in Hammer Hill in northern Kowloon. It's a smaller studio in a residential district, on the side of a small hill, very compact, unlike the Shaw studio which spreads over several acres. It contains all the essentials required to make and complete films, it's cleverly managed and consistently makes money. The GH company distributes its own films and those of other producers, it owns cinemas, linking up with the Cathay circuit, and once published its own movie magazine in competition with Sir Run Run's during the 70's when they were going head-to-head.

When Bruce Lee died in July 1973, Golden Harvest found itself without a major action star. It kept going in the meantime with the success of actor-director-star Michael Hui's comedies, like *The Private Eyes*, which transformed Cantonese cinema. Then GH "discovered" Jackie Chan, who had been in some successful independent movies in the late 70's and made him an international name -- with huge financial returns to GH. Not surprisingly, Chan later set up his own company, Golden Way, but remains closely affiliated with GH. Chow continues to make other films and is deeply involved in much of the financial manipulation going on in the frenzied field of TV satellite transmission and programming

Nowadays it's the dozens of independent filmmakers who keep the bread-and-butter films pouring into the cinemas and across Asia. They own no studios, film on the streets and in buildings, have no unions to worry about, frequently work on two or three films at the same time, with the leading stars appearing in up to a dozen films a year. Working quickly and effectively, these lively young filmmakers often spend only a month shooting and finish post-production in a week. There are no government subsidies for anyone in Hong Kong, although a good deal of laundering goes on with Triad money. Triads have become increasingly involved in the HK film business over the last three years, moving from protection rackets into production itself. Lured by the quick profits to be made, they haven't hesitated to murder and mangle those who stand in their way.

The important aspect to keep in mind is that locally made films always out-gross American films. None of the international blockbusters top local productions. Interestingly, among all this film activity and the busy cinemas of Hong Kong, the large and beautiful Hong Kong Cultural Centre was attracting full houses with the complete series of Rock Demers' *Tales for All* family stories at which parents and their children were being happily entertained.

Hong Kongers have always supported their own films, and the majority of these outside the Golden Harvest orbit are made by companies with such attractive names as Film Workshop (run by director Tsui Hark), Impact Films, Win's Movie, Golden Princess, Grand Well and D&B Films. Many come and go. Comedy is a mix of the verbal and physical, action subjects are divided into crime and historical dramas, always with comic pieces. The craze of the past couple of years has been period costume martial arts pictures such as the *Once Upon A Time in China* series, the fourth recently produced by Tsui Hark.

Hong Kong films of all kinds are sold all over Asia and dominate the box-offices. Anywhere in Asia, other than India and Pakistan, HK films are the most popular. In Japan Jackie Chan is a huge star. It's amazing when you think of it; Hong Kong is the Hollywood of the Far East. But what will happen when Great Britain returns the colony to China in 1997 no one knows.

Many filmmakers and actors have already received Canadian passports and have set up companies in British Columbia. They have made the minimum investment required by our government, \$250,000, made a film, established residence, and returned to HK to go on working until 1997.

But for the present, over twenty critically and publicly acclaimed Asian films are now playing in North America to non-Asian audiences in specialised cinemas. If you speak Mandarin or Cantonese of course, there are hundreds more to be found in the video shops of every Chinatown!

## Author Information

Gerald PRATLEY, OC, LLD, started his career as film critic with the CBC. In 1969, he founded the Ontario Film Institute which he directed until 1990. He has written several books and numerous articles on film,

including *Torn Sprockets*, a history of Canadian cinema. He taught Film History in universities in Toronto and Waterloo, Canada and holds three honorary degrees from Canadian and US universities.

**Gerald A. Pratley** (1923-2011) was born and educated in London, England, and came to Canada in 1946. He started working in Toronto for the CBC as a scriptwriter. He was drawn toward working in motion pictures, and became, in 1948, the CBC's first film critic and commentator.

Gerald Pratley broadcast three programmes a week, *Pratley at the Movies*, *The Movie Scene*, *Music From the Films*, and others, until 1975. During this time he also became the first post-war chairman of the Toronto Film Society, chairman of the Toronto and District Film Council and co-founder of the A-G-E Film Society and correspondent for international magazines such as *Films and Filming*, *Film In Review*, *Variety*, *Hollywood Quarterly* and *International Film Guide*. During the 1950s he wrote for *Canadian Film Weekly* and *Canadian Film Digest*.

He became known as a speaker on all aspects of motion picture art and industry, and was invited to teach film history at the University of Toronto, York University, University of Waterloo, Seneca College and Ryerson Polytechnical University, with individual lectures being given at many other Canadian and US universities and colleges. He has served as a member of various judging panels of competitions and festivals, being one of the members of the first Canadian Film Awards in 1949.

From 1970 to 1975 he was the director of the Stratford (Ontario) International Film Festival, and from 1969 to 1976 he was Chairman of the International Jury of the Canadian Film Awards. He has attended all the world's leading festivals of film, and in particular, for 30 years, the Cannes Festival as CBC correspondent. He has written six books, *The Films of Frankenheimer: Forty Years in Film*; *The Cinema of John Frankenheimer*; *The Cinema of Otto Preminger*; *The Cinema of David Lean*; *The Cinema of John Huston*, and *Torn Sprockets*, a history of the Canadian cinema.

Gerald Pratley has served on the Advisory Boards of the film departments of Ryerson Polytechnical University and Humber College, and as a member of the programme committee of TV Ontario. In 1968 he became the founder-director of the Ontario Film Institute of the Province of Ontario, an organization which has distinguished itself in archival holdings and public service and is known since 1990 as the Cinematheque of Ontario. He taught Film History courses at the Department of Film and Photography, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto and the University of Waterloo.

In 1984, Gerald Pratley was made a Member of the Order of Canada and in 2003 **Officer of the Order of Canada** for his service to Canada through film appreciation. He holds Honorary Degrees in Letters and Fine Arts from York and Waterloo Universities (Ont., Canada) and Bowling Green State University (Ohio, USA).

In 2002, Gerald Pratley received a **Special Genie Award** from the Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television in recognition of his lifelong dedication to the promotion and his exceptional support of Canadian cinema.

He died on 14 March 2011 in Ontario, Canada.