

A CRITICAL FILMOGRAPHY OF HONG KONG CINEMA

JOELLE COLLIER, EDITOR

FORTHCOMING FROM CABOOSE

© CABOOSE 2009. REPRODUCTION WITHOUT PERMISSION PROHIBITED.

*Zhujiang lei*

Tears of the Pearl River [Dawn Must Come]

Hong Kong, 1950, 109', b+w, Cantonese

*Dir* Wang Weiyi (b. 1912) *Scr* Chen Canyon *Cinematog* Lo Kwan-hung *Ed* Cai Chang *Art Dir* Huang Chong *Mus* Chen Gexin *Prod* Cai Chusheng *Act* Cheung Ying (Landlord), Li Qing (Big Bull), Wong Sun, Sek Kin, To Sam-ku, Ma Mang-ping, Chow Chi-sing

Although it was recovering strongly after the Second World War, Hong Kong Cantonese cinema had by the end of the 1940s fallen into a state of critical disrepute, its products disparaged and looked down upon by more highbrow critics. One of the genres dominant at the time was the old-school fantasy martial arts serial, recycled from silent Shanghai cinema. Many of the filmmakers behind these productions were veterans of the old Shanghai film industry now working in exile in Hong Kong's Cantonese cinema as the Mainland became embroiled in civil war between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). *Tears of the Pearl River* was a production of another group of Shanghai exiles—leftist filmmakers connected to the CCP who had come to Hong Kong with a mission of 'cleansing' Cantonese cinema of corruptive influences and tendencies and leading it to greater artistic heights by making films that probed into social questions and conveyed nationalist awareness. The producer of *Tears* was Cai Chusheng, a famous director in his own right, best known for *Song of the Fishermen*, a prize-winning entry at the 1935 Moscow Film Festival, and the director was Wang Weiyi, a newly emergent director from Shanghai who would actually gain greater recognition on the strength of his work in *Tears*.

Cai had come to Hong Kong in 1949 and founded a company named Nanguo ('Southern Kingdom'). The People's Republic had just been founded following the victory of the CCP over the KMT, and the Left was in the ascendancy for the first time in the history of China. The aim of Nanguo was to produce Cantonese pictures in the mould of the kind of 'conscience cinema' that was called for in times of great political change, evoking to a certain extent the romantic socialism of Shanghai cinema in the 'golden period' of the 1930s, during which time Cai had established himself as a leading filmmaker. The

contributions of Cai and company on *Tears* brought a level of technical and social sophistication that was often missing in Cantonese cinema of the period. In fact, the team of Cai, Wang and scriptwriter Chen Canyon sought to elevate the standards of Cantonese films, and with *Tears* achieved a standard that could be compared to that of Mandarin films, normally thought to be far superior to their Cantonese-language counterparts. Indeed, *Tears* was made on a budget that was far above average for a Cantonese picture and more in line with the standards of Mandarin movie production at the time.

The film depicts the lives of Guangdong peasants who have gone through the suffering of the Sino-Japanese War only to experience home-grown oppression by a rapacious landlord in their village. The narrative begins on VJ day, but the sense of triumph is short lived as a government special commissioner dispatched to the village to celebrate the victory over Japan hunkers down with the landlord to requisition land and commandeer the crops of the tenant farmers on the pretext of pacifying the countryside by destroying communist guerrillas. The peasants are the victims of this purge. A farmer, Big Bull, and his sidekick, nicknamed 'Chicken', flee to the city of Guangzhou, where more tribulations await them, being press-ganged into the army to fight in the ensuing civil war. Big Bull's wife goes to Guangzhou in search of her husband but is tricked into becoming a prostitute. Following their discharge from the army, Big Bull and Chicken return to Guangzhou, where Big Bull finds his wife working as a bonded prostitute. Their old oppressor, the landlord, has now become a Guangzhou resident, having been forced by circumstances of the civil war to flee the countryside. He is an old client in the brothel and has his eye on Big Bull's wife.

The message of the film is classical left-wing propaganda in the mould of 1930s Shanghai cinema, conveying a kind of cinematic poetry infused with cries of patriotism and social conscience, often ending on a tragic note that was meant as a wake-up call (examples of this tendency are the silent melodramas featuring Ruan Lingyu, such as *The Little Toys* [1933] and *The Goddess* [1934]). The intervention of left-wing Shanghai filmmakers in Hong Kong Cantonese cinema's post-war development resulted in a renewed association of melodrama with 'social conscience' didacticism. Since Cantonese cinema had its own rich tradition of melodrama, Shanghai filmmakers in Hong Kong did not have their work totally cut out for them, so to speak. *Tears of the Pearl River* plays as an effective melodrama, combining tear-jerking elements with social-conscience themes slanted towards a leftist political ideology, which would have seemed quite innovative at the time (the general criticism of Cantonese cinema was that it was completely disengaged from socio-political discourses and its melodramas were maudlin and tawdry romances).

Another mark of innovation is evident in the ending of *Tears*, which took on a more positive hue instead of descending into tragedy. Big Bull and his wife are reconciled at the end, and the evil landlord gets his comeuppance. The penultimate shot in the film is that of the landlord lying bruised on the ground after being beaten up by the villagers (who finally vent their pent-up frustrations and anger at their oppressor), the shadows of his attackers falling on his battered figure as they walk past him. The striking poetry of this image works as a counterpoint to the trademark of 'realism' that would soon influence a whole new school of Cantonese filmmaking throughout the 1950s, represented by the Union Studio, or 'Chung-luen', and continued by others into the 1960s (the Hong Kong New Wave, which emerged in 1979, can be said to be part of that tradition). *Tears of the Pearl River* was a precursor of the whole realist-melodrama tendency in Cantonese cinema, perhaps the finest of its type, making its impact at a time when Hong Kong cinema as a whole was derided as a poverty-row industry recycling old serials and producing 'seven-day wonders' (i.e., films produced in seven days). It demonstrated that Cantonese cinema could, at heart, be a nationalistic and patriotic cinema, entirely engaged with the currents of the times.

Stephen Teo