CHINESE MOVIES

By LIU SZE-HSUN

It has been the policy of this magazine to call the attention of its readers to outstanding Chinese films, even at a time when American movies were still freely entering East Asia. Not that we found them any better than Western films, but we saw great possibilities for them in the future. China's "Four Hundred Million Customers" are potentially the largest single film market in the world. Now that China has followed the example of the rest of East Asia and since January 10, the day after her declaration of war against the United States and Great Britain, has completely stopped the showing of American and British films, the interest of all of us in the film production of Japan and China should have increased considerably.

In our issue of June 1942 we presented an article entitled "Stars of Japan" by one of the leading Japanese film critics. Here we are publishing an article by a collaborator of the China Film Company.—K.M.

WITH the historic merge in April 1942 of all the leading film-producing concerns in Shanghai into the China United Film Production Company, China's motion-picture industry has entered a new phase of its existence, with a solid financial and technical foundation and an expanded production capacity never before realized. The twenty odd pictures which the new combine has so far produced show a high standard, whether from the point of view of sound, story, montage, ideology, or photography. As is generally recognized, the development of the Chinese film industry had been hampered by inadequate capital, being as long on brains as it was short on budget. This pecuniary obstacle has now been removed, and the industry as a whole has been enabled to produce a turnout never equaled before.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

The making of pictures began in 1909, when pictures were produced under foreign management and financing. Among the earliest movie-minded Chinese, special mention should be made of the late Chow Tsu-chih, one-time Minister of Finance and Prime Minister in the early days of the Republic. He had an ambitious plan of producing pictures to show the scenic beauties and legends of China, with the ulterior motive of accelerating the phonetic writing and unifying the different dialects of the country through the medium of the screen. His plan, however, failed to materialize owing to his untimely death. The Commercial Press, Ltd., the largest publishing company in China, was the first business concern to enter the film-production field, and for ten years (1917/27) it produced many pictures, most of them educational, thus contributing considerably to the initial stage of the film industry in China.

The industry received a great impetus in 1919, when a cinematographic expedition of the Universal Pictures Corporation of America arrived in Shanghai to take outdoor scenes in different parts of China. The expedition had sought the assistance of the Commercial Press Film Department, and through this contact the Chinese gained a good deal of technical experience. Meanwhile, it must be stated, the enormous profits realized from film productions had attracted many other concerns and individuals into the film-production field and thus brought about a mushroom growth of film-producing companies in Shanghai during the period 1920/25. Among these concerns were the Star Motion Picture Company, the Cantonese Motion Picture Company, and the Unique Pictures, Ltd. Although influenced by Hollywood, these companies were financially independent of American capital.
When the powerful United Photoplay Service was organized in Hongkong in 1930 by a group of prominent oversea Chinese (including the Tiger Balm King, Aw Bon Paw), the film industry as a whole experienced a further substantial development. Under the capable management of Lo Ming-yu, this concern later operated three studios in Shanghai and one in Peiping, and produced a large number of good pictures every year, including the famous *A Fisherman's Song*, inspired by the Soviet picture *Volga Boatman*.

Sound pictures in China were first made by the Star Motion Picture Company in 1929, the sound equipment having been brought here by the Fox Pictures, Inc. the previous year.

Government interests entered the film-production field in 1933 when the Chinese Institute of Educational Cinematography was formed in close collaboration with the International Institute of Educational Cinematography of Rome. In 1935 the elaborate Central Studio was inaugurated in Nanking with Lo Ming-yu as its managing director.

ROMANCE AND HISTORY

In the matter of themes, most of the dramatic productions prior to the establishment of the Central Studio centered around romance of a melodramatic nature. A definite change in this respect took place in 1936 when most of the films undertook to expose the dark side of medievalism and to point out important social problems. Movie critics, scenario writers, and screen artists at that time advocated the making of "national defense pictures." The stories and scenarios were supplied by such well-known dramatists as Tien Han and Hung Shen, now both in Chungking.

Following the outbreak of hostilities in August, 1937, all the film-producing companies in Shanghai were closed down, and the Central Studio was evacuated to the interior, together with a group of screen artists. It was not until towards the middle of 1938 that the film industry in Shanghai, the Hollywood of China, was resuscitated, with the reorganization of the Star Motion Picture Company into the Utopia Studio, and the establishment of no less than eight new companies, including the Hsin Hwa and Yi Hwa Companies.

This revival started the fashion of making historical and folklore pictures. Within the space of barely two years (1938/40), a total of at least 120 classical pictures made their appearance, and the box-office receipts from any one of them exceeded the highest mark ever registered by a modern picture. Though, technically speaking, these productions may have left a good deal to be desired, they did help the producers to get on their feet again.

It must be stated that the historical pictures blazed a new trail for China's film industry. Moreover, they had won over a large portion of the Peking opera audience, since most of the pictures were based on stories dramatized on the conventional stage for centuries.

When the China Film Company came into being in the latter half of 1938, it introduced for the first time in China a uniform distribution system and the traveling movie units. Following the outbreak of the Greater East Asia War on December 8, 1941, the China Film Company, the only Sino-Japanese joint enterprise of its kind in Central China, was granted the right by the National Government in Nanking to take full control of the distribution of all Chinese and foreign films and to supervise the work of all the film-producing concerns in Central and South China. In April this year, under the guidance of Mr. Nagamasa Kawakita, Vice-President of the China Film Company, the various film-producing concerns in Shanghai, including the Hsin Hwa, Yi Hwa, Kow Hwa and the Golden Star, merged into the China United Film Production Company. This step was taken to strengthen the production machine and to provide greater scope of display for talent. Having augmented its capital from $3,000,000 to $12,500,000 towards the end of 1942, this company now has among its
directors several financial leaders of Shanghai, including Percy Chu, William Gockson, and Alfred K.M. Huang, and has worked out a detailed plan to produce at least four pictures a month in the future.

STAGE AND SCREEN

The Chinese people are theater-conscious, and in no other country has the stage influenced the screen so much as in China. In some historical pictures, the actors and actresses imitated the acting of the conventional stage to a ridiculous extent, without realizing that the mannerisms of the Chinese stage are peculiar to the Chinese theatrical tradition. However, the Chinese people like it. The same Peking opera audience goes to see the screen versions of the stage plays. They want to see what the same plays look like on the screen, in a more concrete and less symbolic form. Most Chinese show greater interest in things within the range of their comprehension and, as their minds revolve around a limited number of historical stories and figures, they could never fail to find fascination in them. But the unfortunate thing is that most of the historical pictures with a strong appeal to the middle and lower classes were not treated in a proper cinematographic manner, though they have proved financial successes, having enabled their producers to make more than enough to compensate for the loss sustained during the first eight months of the "China Incident," when they were practically idle.

The modern stage has a great deal to do with the Chinese cinema industry. As it is, it provides a veritable training ground for screen artists. The past ten years have witnessed an abundant crop of screen artists coming from the new stage. Most of them have the advantage of a good education, which enables them to give expression to the subtler and more complex feelings. They have contributed considerably to the improvement of the art of screen acting in China.

LANGUAGE AND EXPORT BUSINESS

Sound pictures have been instrumental to a marked extent in bringing about the popularity of the Kuo Yu (national language). Just as they had been a handicap to the unification of the nation, the various dialects of the different provinces had, for a time, constituted a handicap to the making of sound pictures. It was through insistent use by all the leading film-producing concerns that Kuo Yu, which is being understood better from year to year by the rising generations of China, has become the official language for dialogue. At present the pictures produced in Shanghai are all in the "national language," though Cantonese dialect is also used for pictures made in South China. There were two pictures in Shanghai dialect five years ago. The Fukenese dialect has also been used for the commentating of a few documentary pictures and newsreels, for the benefit of the Fukenese communities in the South Sea regions. Unique Pictures was the first concern to make films with Cantonese dialogue for exhibition in Kwangtung Province and in the large Cantonese centers in the South Sea Islands.

Export of Chinese films is chiefly to the South Sea Islands, and occasionally to the United States. Sable Cicada, a historical spectacle produced by the Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company four years ago, was successfully shown for three weeks on Broadway in New York. The success of this and other Chinese pictures in the United States is primarily due to the curiosity they aroused with regard to the ancient customs and habits of the Chinese people. Besides, there are large Chinese communities in America who would not fail to avail themselves of the occasional showing of Chinese pictures.

The first picture ever exported was the well-known feature Legend of the Willow Pattern. It was released through Gaumont in the British Isles, where it had over 750 first-run releases, followed by an equally successful run in the United States and other parts of the world in 1926 and 1927. Recently, there has been a continuous export to Japan and Manchukuo of Chinese pictures with superimposed Japanese subtitles.
Li Li-hwa, who, at the age of eighteen, is one of China’s greatest movie stars

(Makita Photograph)
SCENES FROM
CHINESE MOVIES

Mei Hsi and Yuan Mei-yun in *Little Women*, a picture showing life in the slums of Shanghai.

Butterfly Wu, China's former movie queen, in *When the Peacock Flies Southeastward*. Note the Chinese version of a Hollywood bedroom.

Yuan Mei-yun in *Beauty of Beauties*, an outstanding historical film.
In view of the immense interest shown by people abroad in things Chinese and the tremendous changes that have taken place in China during recent years, one is inclined to believe that there are poten­
tialities for Chinese pictures getting into the world market. Although they could not possibly stand any rigid competition from the viewpoint of technique, they could certainly win a position by virtue of their interesting stories. The language handicap in the export business is not so serious as is generally supposed, since the superimposition of subtitles in foreign languages could easily solve this difficulty.

With no Western markets available for the time being, Western-language subtitles are not being used. But it is reasonable to expect that this will be done as soon as export again becomes possible.

PARADE OF STARS, OLD AND NEW

The Chinese cinema-goers want screen artists who are more than mere nice-looking men and women. They want intelligent and talented stars who are well educated and have mastered the art of acting. During the past twenty years, the stars who have made marked impressions upon the minds of movie fans include Miss Lee Min-hui, Miss Chwen Lin-yu, and Miss Butterfly Wu; Mr. Chao Tan, Mr. Wang Tzu-lung, Mr. Kao Chan-fei, Mr. Wang Yuan-lung, and Mr. Wang Na-tung.

With the exception of the last-mentioned three, who are now back in Shanghai, most of these screen luminar­ies have either retired or died. Miss Lee Min-hui who, as a well-known star, had cut a conspicuous figure some eight years ago, is now almost a forgotten figure in screenland. Chao Tan is now living somewhere in the interior, as is Miss Butterfly Wu.

At present, as in former years, the best movie talents are concentrated in Shanghai. Miss Nancy Chen (or Chen Ying-shang, as she is better known to her Chinese admirers), is still riding high as the “Queen of Chinese Movieland.” Her name is a household word throughout the country, and she is regarded as a model of modernized life for Chinese women. Her most popular starring vehi­cle is Hua Mo Lan (China’s Joan of Arc) which recently scored a great triumph in Japan, where it was shown in ten first-run theaters simultaneously.

Miss Chen’s most valuable possessions are charm and youthful exuberance. She also has that prime requisite—she knows how to make the best of life and enjoy it. She would have had a happy and well-rounded life even if her star had never zoomed up China’s Hollywood horizon.

Miss Li Li-hwa the beautiful eighteen-year-old actress, is generally regarded as the most unusual case in Chinese screen­land. She has had a meteoric rise to fame within the short space of two years. Acclaimed as one of the most talented as well as the most lucky screen artists, this petite star has already played the leading role in fifteen pictures and holds hypnotic sway over millions of movie­goers. Miss Li started her film career at the age of sixteen, when she joined the Yi Hwa Motion Picture Company, and is now one of the high-salaried stars in the China United Film Production Company. Her first starring vehicle for this company was The Flower Girl, which had a run of four weeks at the Strand Theater some months ago. Beauty, candidness, and intelligence are the valuable qualities that have enabled her to become one of the nation’s favorite stars.

For the time being, the most popular glamour girl of the screen is Miss Violet Koo. Her success should be attributed to two pictures, Vamp (see The XXth Century, March 1942) and The Merry-making Milady, in which she played the title roles and won acclaim by her daring acting. Starting her film career some ten years ago, Miss Koo did not receive more than casual attention until last year, when the above-mentioned two pictures appeared. Her maturity as a woman as well as an actress, together with her undeniable “sex appeal,” are the main reasons for her present popularity.

Other top-notch film actresses include Yuan Mei-yun, Chow Mai-hwa, Wang
Tan-feng, and Chen Yen-yen. Miss Yuan was a well-known Peking opera star before she joined the movies. She has an almost classic beauty, so that when she played the role of Hsi Si in Beauty of Beauties she achieved the greatest success of her film career. Miss Chow Mai-hwa is a typical middle-class family girl and is very popular with housewives and shopkeepers. She is also noted for her trained expression of pathetic emotion. Miss Wang Tan-feng is a budding flower full of loveliness and brightness and is popular with both young and old. So far she has not yet played any role of importance; but it may be predicted that she has a future. Miss Chen Yen-yen represents a picture of thwarted love. In Madame Butterfly, the first picture of the China United Film Production Company, she acted her best, for in her daily life she is just that type of girl.

THE FORGOTTEN MEN

In China, movie actresses receive greater attention than actors, yet everybody knows at least four prominent male stars: Wang Yuan-lung, Kao Chang-fei, Liu Chuen, and Mei Hsi. Wang Yuan-lung is the oldest of the four and has been on the screen for about twenty years. He is noted for his ability of characterization and faultless acting. He has a good foundation in Peking opera acting and is unrivaled in his representation of middle-aged historical figures.

Kao Chang-fei, who returned from Chungking in the spring of 1942, has been facing the camera for about twenty years and has achieved a position worthy of attention. He is a close friend of Wang Yuan-lung, both being graduates of a military academy in the North. Throughout his career, Kao has never been known to commit the fault so common with Chinese actors and actresses, namely, that of overacting. In the forthcoming film Toward Eternity he plays the coveted role of Viceroy Lin Chih-hsu. Because of his fine physique he is always given the role of a righteous man in both historical and modern pictures.

Liu Chuen is a favorite with the younger generation. He lives a Westernized life and plays the roles of progressive young Chinese. He always takes care to learn something from Hollywood actors and shows it in his own acting. He is now regarded as a prototype of modern youth, with all its fancies and whims and psychological contradictions. And he is proud of it.

Mei Hsi is one of the finest actors in China and today the only actor qualified to portray the mellowed man of affairs. His part in Castle on the Whangpoo was so well played that he was given an almost similar role in the all-star superproduction Po Ai (“Humanity”). Mei is a man of grand vitality and one of the few actors in China able to express his individuality in the course of his acting.

Han Lan-kan and Yin Hsiu-keng, the Chinese counterparts of Laurel and Hardy, have injected sparks of comedy into Chinese films and have taught the Chinese to look at the lighter side of things. This is an achievement which has contributed considerably to the improvement of Chinese movies; for, before these comedians appeared on the screen, joviality and humor in the modern sense of the words were conspicuous by their absence from both stage and screen. Modern China owes much laughter to these two men.

Han Lan-kan started his career as a slapstick comedian in the amusement centers of Shanghai. He joined the United Photoplay Service some ten years ago to play supporting roles. His first starring vehicle was Unexpected Bliss, produced by the Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company. He is now with the China United Film Production Company and appears in most of the pictures produced by that studio. Yin Hsiu-keng is a graduate of the now defunct Li Hwa Screen Artists Training School operated by the United Photoplay Service in Peking. He came to Shanghai in 1935 and is today an important asset of the China United Film Production Company, being part and parcel of Han Lan-kan, just as Han is of him.
LUMINARIES OF THE CHINESE MOVIE FIRMAMENT

Chow Mai-hwa, popular with "small-town" audiences

Yin Hsu-keng and Han Lan-kun, China's "Laurel and Hardy"

Nancy Chen, China's most famous film star, and Liu Chuen (left) in The Family

S. K. Chang, leading director and one of the main supports of China's movie industry

Wang Tan-feng, a rising young star
Yin Hsin-keng, China's "Oliver Hardy," does his antics to win smiles from Violet Koo in *The Vamp*.

Kao Chan-fei, polished actor of prominent historical roles.

Wang Yuan-hung with Butterfly Wu in *When the Peacock Flies Southeastward*.

Mei Hsi, a fine portrayer of the mellowed man of affairs.

Chen Yen-yen in *The Family*. She is being regarded with amazement by Yin Hsin-keng, reproachfully by Djang Ming.
According to recent investigations, the maximum salary for actors and actresses is between CRB $8,000 and $10,000 per month. Nancy Chen makes $10,000. Violet Koo, Li Li-hwa, and Chow Mai-hwa each about $5,000 to $7,000. The average salary is around $1,000 or a little more, with the lowest pay being about $500. Extras generally get $20 a day.

MEN WITH MEGAPHONES

Among film directors we should mention S. K. Chang, Po Wan-chang, Li Ping-tesen, Ma-hsu Wei-pang, and Wang Yin. Mr. Chang, chief director of Humanity, was very prominent in the development of China's movie industry. Mr. Po studied film direction in Hollywood and has at least ten universally recognized excellent pictures to his credit, including Hua Mo Lan and Under Peony Blossoms, both starring Miss (Nancy) Chen Yung-shang. Mr. Li Ping-tesen possesses a solid foundation in art and literature, and his productions are remarkable for beautiful effects and camera tricks. Mr. Ma-hsu is regarded as a scholar-director. While a student of fine arts in his young days, he was fond of directing plays on the amateur modern stage. He joined the movies some ten years ago and now has the unique distinction of being the only qualified director of horror pictures in China. Mr. Wang Yin started his career as an actor and played leading roles in many an action picture. He has been on the job of directing only two years and is regarded as a capable director with a deep insight into the life of the lower classes.

Outstanding scenario writers at present include Chow Yi-pei, Yao Ke, Koo Chung-yi, and Fei Mo. Film director Li Ping-tesen has also written several good scenarios during the past two years.

LITERARY THEMES AND MANDARIN DUCKS

While the themes of Chinese pictures produced before 1936 were mainly about romance and tragedy, more or less on the pattern of the plays for the conventional stage, government leaders after 1936 came to know the value of publicity through the screen, and at the same time cultural leaders advocated the making of pictures for educational purposes. Consequently, stories dealing with malpractices and corrupt social conditions in warlord days were screened. For a short time, pictures of the "national defense" type were produced. When historical and folklore pictures became popular some three years ago, there was a wild hunt for stories. Anything in history that might be adapted for film themes was made use of, and nearly all historical and legendary figures have had their share on the screen. Among them are China's all-time sage Confucius; the ever-victorious General Fo Fei of the Sung dynasty; Wu Sung, the Samson of China; Empress Wu Chi-tien, the only woman ruler in Chinese history; Yang Kwei-fei, the beloved of the scapegoat Emperor Tang Ming-huang. The human types consist of kings and queens, scholars and soldiers, satraps and traitors, beauties and trollops, heroes and villains, courtiers and singsong girls, swordsmen and magicians.

Immediately following the tide of historical and folklore pictures, the fashion set in of producing pictures based upon the novels of what was known as the "mandarin ducks and butterflies" school. Such novels were very popular in the early days of the Republic. They deal with the clandestine affairs of men and women against the social background of early Republican China, marking a new departure in the field of novel writing. While this type of novel was decidedly new to China at its time of popularity, it offers nothing striking to the movie-goers of today.

Modern novels have been adapted for film stories during the past two years. Notable examples are Family (see The XXth Century, November 1941), Spring, and Autumn—a series of novels written by Pa King.

Since the outbreak of the Greater East Asia War, it has been the general tendency, in the matter of scenario writing, to encourage the people to help in the gigantic task of constructing the
Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The much-publicized three-million-dollar picture Toward Eternity, a joint production of the China Film Co. and the Manchukuo Movie Co. being filmed at the China United Film Production Company, tells the story, in a rather frank manner, of how Britain came to force China to cede Hongkong, and is designed at the same time to bring home to the Chinese people the stark realities of suffering as a result of British imperialistic wars. The story centers around the life of Viceroy Lin Chih-hsu, one of China's greatest patriots, who took upon himself the task of eradicating the evil of opium-smoking.

Apart from the censorship exercised by the China Film Company itself, the films produced by this company have to submit respectively to the censorship of the Shanghai Municipal Council, the French Municipal Council, and of the Ministry of Publicity in Nanking. Owing to the close co-operation between the China Film Company and the official organizations in China, the censors have rarely to exert their powers.

CHINESE CINEMAS

There are at present about one hundred and fifty cinemas in Central and South China. Of this number, sixty-five are located in Shanghai. Movie entertainment in South China is centered in Canton, which is actually the cultural center of South China. In rural districts where, owing to lack of electricity, there have never been any movie shows, the China Film Company's traveling movie units have rendered valuable service. These units, now twenty-five in number, are equipped with generators and projection machines and composed of trained men who have done excellent work in promoting the film industry of China and in propagandizing the policies of the Government.

On an average, the making of a picture at the present time costs between CRB $250,000 and $300,000. Last year, before the commencement of the Greater East Asia War, each picture cost about $100,000, compared with $40,000 two years previously. The present high cost is mainly due to the scarcity and high cost of film negative.

Of all the first-run theaters in Central China, the Grand Theater in Shanghai has the largest seating capacity with 1,953 seats, followed by the Dianward Theater in Nanking with 1,700 seats. In Shanghai there are a further half dozen cinemas with a seating capacity of from 1,500 to 1,700 seats.

Tickets in the first-run houses in Shanghai cost from CRB $5.00 to $8.00 and the second-run houses from $2.00 to $3.00.

Recent investigations reveal that the average number of visitors to each first-run theater in Shanghai every month is between 45,000 and 65,000. For the month of October 1942, the Grand Theater had a total of 65,733 visitors, with more than twenty full houses registered when the China United Film Production Company's super-production Humanity was shown in the middle of the month. Among Shanghai's second-run theaters doing good business should be mentioned the Golden Gate Theater, which registered a total of 54,000 visitors in October 1942.

The mind ought sometimes to be diverted, that it may return the better to thinking.

Phaedrus