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“To Each His or Her Own Ambition”



A concise history of the Chong Gay Organisation in Singapore

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Top row to bottom left The changing logos of Chong Gay Organisation.
Bottom right Logo of Overseas Movie Organisation.

During the lull of local film production fervour in the 1970s to 1980s, we could count only a handful of individuals or film companies who risked financial loss and ridicule in their attempts to revive the then moribund film industry here. The Chong Gay Organisation, which was established in the early 1960s, was one such company. In the mid-1970s, it made three local films in rapid succession. The third and final production, *Two Sides of the Bridge*, though an unsuccessful financial venture, is well remembered even till today.

“HEALTHY” BEGINNINGS

Chong Gay was founded in October 1964 by a Hokkien entrepreneur, businessman and philanthropist Koh Tian Kit as Chong Gay Film Co. Ltd. Chong Gay, which literally translates to “an integration” (of arts) in Chinese, was born out of Koh’s belief in cinema as a cultural tool and of its potential to wield a positive influence on society.

To that end, Chong Gay started distributing “popular films of artistic value”¹ from Hong Kong and Japan to the Singapore-Malaysia market. Supporting this agenda were Koh’s sons and Chong Gay’s managing directors, Koh Seng Leong and Koh Seng Guan, as well as film director Tang Pek Chee (*Lion City*, 1960) lending support as general manager.

The film distribution and exhibition market in the 1960s was dominated by Shaw, Cathay, Kong Ngee and Eng Wah, but Chong Gay planted itself firmly among these heavyweights with its foray into film exhibition. Chong Gay first acquired the old Victory Theatre at



Chong Gay’s envelope design from 1966, with the company name, logo and address. On the back of the envelope was an advertisement for the film they distributed – *My Darling Grandchild* that starred child actress Fung Bo Bo. (Image courtesy of Wong Han Min)

the Gay World Amusement Park in July 1968. First opened in 1945, New Victory Theatre was rebranded as a Chong Gay movie theatre in July 1968, the company’s first in Singapore.

A year later, in August 1969, Chong Gay took the next step of broadening its film supply sources. It wanted to avoid screening what it defined as exploitative and profit-driven movie-making works coming mainly from Hong Kong and Hollywood. Instead, Chong Gay picked up local distribution rights to first-run films produced by four major movie companies from Hong Kong known as “Great Wall”, “Phoenix”, “Sun Luen” and “Fei Lung”. While the films made by these firms were well-celebrated, they made a

1 “An Announcement by Chong Gay Film Co.” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 4 June 1965, p. 8.



The opening film of Chong Gay's New Victory Theatre was *Eternal Love*, a Hong Kong Cantonese romantic melodrama starring Nam Hung and Lu Kei.



The New Victory Theatre at Gay World Amusement Park. (Images courtesy of Wong Han Min)

splash less for its titillating content but for the heavy moralising and “healthy content and function” inherent in their narratives. For their espousal of socialist agendas in their works and receiving support from the Chinese communist state in the making of their films, these films were considered examples of “left-wing” filmmaking.

by the new flagship Golden Theatre, and the building of Kallang Theatre, their second theatre complex. These cinemas were considered modern for their time – envisioned as part of mixed-use buildings like the many office-cum-entertainment complexes in Singapore today.

Contemporary audiences may be familiar with Golden Theatre’s old cinema halls that have since been operated by Rex Cinemas and The Projector. When Golden Theatre officially opened in October 1973, the 2,000-seat theatre was the largest in Singapore, putting Chong Gay on par with Cathay and Shaw as a cinema titan. This new status was also in no small part due to Chong Gay’s success in becoming the first exhibitor in Singapore (other than the Cathay and Shaw Circuits) to obtain the rights to first-run major English language films, such as *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Sting* (1973).

BIG SCREEN MODELS

Part of Chong Gay’s expansion plans included the construction of the 24-storey Golden Mile Tower, anchored



Top Handbill advertisement of colour films distributed by Chong Gay and produced by four major film companies from Hong Kong. They were screened at the Palace and Galaxy Theatres. (Images courtesy of Wong Han Min)

Right Handbill advertisements of social-realist dramas *My Home, But Not Sweet* (1969) and *Spring Summer Autumn & Winter* (1969). They were Mandarin colour films produced by Hong Kong’s Great Wall Movie Enterprise Ltd and Sun Luen Film Co. respectively, distributed by Chong Gay and screened at the Palace and Diamond Theatres. (Images courtesy of Wong Han Min)



2 “Chong Gay Theatres Ltd organises inauguration ceremony.” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 6 September 1969, p. 20.



A 1971 calendar promoting Golden Mile Tower. Chong Gay Theatres Ltd was named as the developer. (Image courtesy of Wong Han Min)

was not hypocritical for Chong Gay even as the operator continued to champion “healthy content” in Cinema. Their preference for conscientious messages of “healthy” films was perhaps made distinct with the decision to open Golden Theatre with *Rebirth of a Deaf Mute*, a Great-Wall produced film, instead of the Hollywood blockbusters the theatre had been contracted to distribute and screen.

Rebirth of a Deaf Mute was a social realist drama portraying the injustice of child labour and the poor working conditions in a shipyard run by an oppressive owner. Chong Gay’s choice of this film to open Golden Theatre could be seen as a move against the grain of the local film market.³

RAISING CAST, CREW AND MORALS

While Chong Gay was scoring these external deals with Hollywood-linked distributors and “left-wing” film companies, things were beginning to shift internally in the company. Before Golden Theatre opened with *Rebirth of a Deaf Mute*, Koh Tian Kit, the founding director of Chong Gay, passed away in April 1973.

Within two years, the control of the organisation shifted into the hands of its vice-chairman and managing director Lim Djit Sun, a businessman and entrepreneur from Indonesia.⁴ Lim’s

leadership sparked a series of ventures that Chong Gay is now remembered for. In April 1975, Lim declared Chong Gay’s plans to form a movie production arm in Singapore to make films that reflected local interests and themes.⁵ Much like his predecessor Koh, this movie-making impulse stemmed from Lim’s view that the films showing in local cinemas were overtly commercial and presented a corrupt, degenerate and subversive culture. To right the wrongs of screen culture and address the dearth of “healthy” films in the market, Lim thought it pertinent that Chong Gay embark on producing their own crop of socially conscious films.

Armed with a moral mission, Chong Gay started earnestly importing filming equipment from overseas and engaging foreign film production experts to guide and mentor local crew. Recruitment

and actors’ training classes were held under the supervision of Hong Kong film producer-director Chan Man. Chan was an apt mentor, having directed *China Wife* (1957), a Nanyang-themed film produced by Kong Ngee that was shot on location in Singapore.⁶

With Chong Gay, Chan directed their first two films under pseudonyms⁷, *Crime Does Not Pay*⁸ (1975) and *Hypocrites*⁹ (1976), both social realist dramas made in Mandarin. While members of the cast were all Singaporeans, including experienced stage, television and radio play actors and actresses, local crew learnt on the job from crew members brought over from Hong Kong during the three-month shooting period of these two films.

Crime Does Not Pay was more well-received by audiences than *Hypocrites*,

- 3 Major film companies like Shaw and Cathay were contractually bound to choose between importing or exporting films from and to the “free world” markets of Taiwan and handling films from communist China or “leftist” Hong Kong film studios. The exclusivity of such deals might have paved an opportunity for Chong Gay to become the sole promoters of leftist cinema in Singapore. In fact, Chong Gay was the only exhibitor of films produced by the state-run propaganda department in communist North Korea.
- 4 Prior to taking up leadership at Chong Gay, Lim’s name had already been made with the establishment of several businesses in Singapore. Some of these are still household names, such as Overseas Emporium, a departmental store that retailed China-made goods and stands at People’s Park Complex today.
- 5 “Chong Gay Organisation will set up film production department for making movies with local themes, in time for the Asean Film Festival.” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 30 April 1975, p. 29.
- 6 As a genre, Nanyang films portrayed exoticised traits of an amorphous Malaya region that foreign audiences lapped up. Popular elements of Nanyang films included shots of tropical backgrounds and swaying coconut trees, singing actors, men in sarongs and references to what was seen as the prime beverage of the Straits – Nanyang coffee.
- 7 Inspired by the trend in overseas Chinese stage and left-wing screen productions, cast and crew in Chong Gay’s film productions often took on pseudonyms. The screenplay for *Two Sides of the Bridge*, Chong Gay’s third feature, was written by “Lim Ann” or Lim Meng Chew, already an accomplished journalist and writer and director for the stage. He co-directed the film with “Chen Ge”, known off-screen as Tan Chang Meng, also an equivalent polymath in the fields of journalism, film criticism and stage directing. The composer for the film’s theme songs was credited as “Zhu Ye” or Reuben Yap. Lead roles in *Two Sides of a Bridge*, were taken up by Chan Pong Koon (“Fang Liang”) and Tay Lee Meng (“Tay Seen Yei”).
- 8 *Crime Does Not Pay* was a family drama revolving around a tyrannical and unscrupulous father figure involved in drug trafficking. But the subject matter was also a fitting one as the country was grappling with growing substance abuse during the time of its premiere at the 5th Asian Film Festival in Singapore in November 1975. Subsequently screened in Chong Gay theatres, the film and its strong social messages received positive feedback from audiences.
- 9 A satirical social comedy, *Hypocrites* follows two families which cross paths – one ensconced in the trappings of wealth and indulgence in decadence and debauchery, and the other working their way up in society under the watchful and fatherly eye of a frugal and diligent food hawker.



1st from bottom left Newspaper advertisement of *Crime Does Not Pay*.

2nd and 3rd from bottom left Advertisements of *Hypocrites* in the local Chinese and English press. (Images courtesy of Su Zhangkai)

Top Publicity brochure of North Korean propaganda film *A Flower Girl* (1972), which was based on a revolutionary opera written by Kim Il-sung, then-leader of the communist republic. The film was dubbed in Mandarin by China's Changchun Film Studio and screened in Chong Gay's Kong Chian (Toa Payoh) and Zenith (Tampines Road) theatres in November 1973. (Image courtesy of Wong Han Min)

Left Film poster of *Two Sides of the Bridge*. (Image courtesy of Wong Han Min)



Production photos of *Two Sides of the Bridge*, on location in Kelantan and Terengganu, on the east coast of peninsular Malaysia. From *Silat Weekly* Issue #9, published 15 July 1976. (Image courtesy of Su Zhangkai)

but what struck observers in the promotion of the two films was Chong Gay's emphasis on the casts' collective effort as compared to other film companies which stressed individual stardom and relied on sensationalist marketing. Sadly, these observational footnotes in archived film criticism are all that is left of both films. The films were reportedly lost in a fire in a Hong Kong warehouse.¹⁰

THE LAST ACCOLADE: TWO SIDES OF THE BRIDGE

Two Sides of the Bridge was a stand-out film for Chong Gay, fondly remembered as the first and only Chong Gay film made by an all-local cast and crew (in this case, referring to both Singaporeans and Malaysians) and considered a truly local accomplishment in feature film-making.¹¹

The film chronicles the relationship of a young couple, Rufei and Lingfeng, who face the pressures of living in a rapidly transforming and materialistic Singapore. While Lingfeng perseveres at her day job in a textile factory and night classes to improve her skill sets, Rufei is lured by a high-paying but dubious job at a money-lending firm which eventually entraps him in risky investment schemes. To evade his heavy debts, Rufei returns to his rural home in Kelantan and finds some brief respite and quietude before becoming embroiled in a ploy with drug traffickers.

In contrast to the typical *kungfu* flicks and Qiong Yao romance melodramas showing in local cinemas at the time, *Two Sides of the Bridge* appealed to audiences with its "healthy", realist portrayal of lives in urban Singapore and rural parts of Malaysia. It could almost be perceived as exemplar of a kind of local film-making that audiences preferred to be devoid of crass commercialism, shock tactics, lurid sex and violence.

For all its acclaim, *Two Sides of the Bridge* did not do well at the box office. For a while, the Chong Gay film production team was undaunted. They continued their filming efforts by producing short documentaries and participating in film shoots here by Hong Kong film companies, biding their time for opportunities to carry out production on three scripts that had been written – namely, *Three Female Students*, *Upstairs Downstairs* and *Ghost Worshipper*.

In the meantime, the organisation expanded its theatre network, opening the 2,400-seat Kallang Theatre in April 1978¹² and building cinemas in the new housing towns sprouting across the island. In the midst of this, Lim established Overseas Movie (Pte) Ltd and managed it concurrently with Chong Gay.¹³

By then, China was in its post-Mao era and the Overseas Movie-Chong Gay

10 According to Tan Chang Meng, co-director of Chong Gay's third local feature production, *Two Sides of the Bridge*.

11 The film premiered in December 1976 at the Golden Theatre and subsequently enjoyed retrospective screenings in 1990s and during the 11th Singapore International Film Festival in 1998. In April 2017, several cast and crew members came together for a retrospective screening programmed by the National Museum of Singapore Cinematheque.



Left Film-still from *Two Sides of the Bridge*. Standing in the middle is Choo Siew Fong, who is now still acting for local television. She was also Chong Gay and Overseas Movie's publicity manager in the 1980s. (Image courtesy of Wong Han Min)

Right Film catalogue of China Film Festival '85, organised by Overseas Movie. In the catalogue is a map showing the distribution and photos of cinemas owned by Overseas Movie (Pte) Ltd in Singapore. (Images courtesy of Wong Han Min)



34 theatres began screening Mandarin films produced by studios there. Convinced of their high production standards and cultural value, Lim was tireless in marketing these films even when they risked putting the company at financial risk. Lim's persistent efforts extended to organising China Film Festivals from the mid-1980s onwards, which included inviting delegates from China to Singapore for film exchange programmes.¹⁴

These signalled opportunities for Chong Gay's production arm to start making films again as the idea of China-Singapore co-productions was raised during these exchanges. However, Lim passed away abruptly in 1987 and plans for such co-productions were dropped. The fourth Chong Gay feature never materialised and the lull in local film production extended for a few more years until 1990's *Medium Rare*.

CHONG GAY AND OF THE PRINCESS THEATRE PAST: "TO EACH HIS OR HER OWN AMBITION"

The cinemas belonging to Chong Gay and Overseas Movie have long passed into the hands of other and newer players; some taking on merely their names as in the case of Princess Theatre, others their architecture such as The Golden Theatre. But we can recall Chong Gay today as a notable if not persistent player that sought to revive a moribund film industry with films bearing moral messages. Chong Gay charted its own course in film history against risks of financial loss and even ridicule in their attempts. As the late Lim Djit Sun put it in response to talk that he was unwise to promote unprofitable Chinese films in the 1980s, "To each his or her own ambition".



Overseas Movie's "New Crown" and "New Town" cinemas in Ang Mo Kio, before they were redeveloped into Djitsun Mall. Circa 1990s. (Image courtesy of Wong Han Min)

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12 Kallang Theatre was eventually sold to the government in 1981.

13 Ngiam Tong Hai, "Work on five cinemas costing \$10m." *The Straits Times*, 23 September 1981, p. 9.

14 Chong Wing Hong, "More China-made films on the way." *The Straits Times*, 10 October 1984, p. 9.