

Zhuang Xue Fang (庄雪芳): The Queen of Amoy Filmsby **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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She was one of the biggest attractions of the getai in the 1950s who later became the box-office draw in Hokkien films in its heyday. Meet Zhuang Xue Fang, the “Queen of Amoy Films”.

Many of our fathers and grandfathers’ generation had probably passed their time in their younger days watching Hokkien movies in the 1950s and 1960s, reportedly the most popular form of entertainment for this dialect group in Singapore. More than 200 of these black and white flicks were shot, often in Hong Kong (but never shown there) and Taiwan, sometimes produced with funding from Singapore companies, specifically for Hokkien speaking film markets like Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and Philippines.

One of the biggest stars of these mainly musical films was Zhuang Xue Fang, the reputed “Queen of Amoy Films” and a household name that meant magic back in those days of the *getai*. Her performance was then the main attraction for people who flocked to the Great World and New World Amusement Parks. The fans of the golden age of Hokkien films at that time would mob her wherever she went. *Midnight Kiss* (《午夜香吻》), *Success* (《出人头地》), etc are her signature songs.

Zhuang Xue Fang was at a talk held at the National Library in October 2009, where Associate Professor Yung Sai Shing from the Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore, spoke about the influence of Hokkien films. When those present found out Zhuang was there, they immediately whipped out their cameras and began flashing away, proving without a doubt that she still had what it takes even after almost forty years away from the limelight.

Born in 1932 in Singapore, Zhuang’s father had died when she was very young, and the little girl probably had to grow up overnight, instilling in her a strong and independent streak.

Singing and dancing seem to be in her blood for she could do both equally well since the age of four without any formal training. She practically learnt how to read by all the lyrics that she looked at. At the age of 15, she was already performing in Southeast Asia with a *gewutuan* (literally song and dance troupe - a standard evening of *gewutuan* performance began with music, followed by different programs of dancing, short skits or one-act plays and singing) while her friends were still in school.

“It was not for economic reasons that I left school. I used to get sick for a few months at a stretch and my superstitious mother felt that I should give up schooling,” Zhuang explained.

Soon she was known as the “Fairy Maiden of the Kingdom of Song” (歌国仙女). She was acting in Mandarin stage plays like Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise* which laid the groundwork for her eventual involvement in the movie business. To her, these stage performances were the most thrilling and fulfilling experiences although she enjoyed greater popularity and success in her singing and film career.

“The feeling that you and your audience have established rapport is something that cannot be found elsewhere. Acting on stage requires concentration, as there is no room for slip ups,” she said.

Her acting chops are also nurtured from being in the same shows with actors from China, who had come to Singapore to perform on the *getai* since the 1930s. Local Chinese drama today owes a great deal to these pioneers. Zhuang considered herself lucky to have been trained by these veterans. She reminisced, “They guided me closely and I can never forget them.”

Zhuang rose to become a star in her own right at the age of 17. By 18 years old, she became the pillar of a theatre troupe. But the young lady was restless and discontented.

“I left home to make a career for myself. People in Singapore and Malaysia all have this ambition to make it outside of their hometown. My mother and older brother are here, and that has always been a dream of mine – to return home after making good.”

She was barely 20 years old when she formed her own “Xuefang Song and Dance Troupe” (雪芳歌舞团) to tour and perform in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. She was a success in every town because besides entertaining, she raised funds for charity.

“Every time we visited a small town, we would approach the Chinese schools and stage a performance to raise funds for them. I missed my opportunity to receive an education, perhaps that is why I appreciate it so much.” This charitable side to her would continue to manifest itself even well into the present day.

Veteran entertainer Seong Koon Low Won (上官流云), who knew Zhuang for more than 40 years, and who had worked with her since the *getai* days, felt her success was due to her tenacity and a never-say-die attitude, “She’s a fast learner and spared no effort perfecting her craft. She’s as good as if not better than most of her contemporaries. She’s a big star in Southeast Asia.”

At the height of her career in 1957, Shaw Brothers invited Zhuang to make a cameo appearance in a Mandarin film, *The Lady of Mystery* (《神秘美人》), starring the famous movie star Li Xiang Lan (李香兰). Zhuang would choreograph and perform in two dance scenes. The film kick-started her movie career.

Within a couple of months, in 1958, she would star as the lead in her Hokkien movie debut, *The Wandering Songstress* (《天涯歌女》), produced by a Singapore company, Eng Wah (荣华). The director was Wong Tin Lam (王天林), who is the father of famous Hong Kong producer-director, Wong Jing (王晶). Zhuang would act and sing in the movie. One of the songs was the well-known *Fengyang Flower Drum* (《凤阳花鼓》).

She recalled, “Most of the directors for Hokkien films then were not speakers of the dialect. But there will always be an assistant director on set to unify the various accents of the actors, who could be from different districts.”

The Wandering Songstress was the biggest box office hit for a Hokkien film then. Zhuang would act in more than 30 films in the next ten years, mostly Hokkien musicals but also some Mandarin dramas and comedies. According to existing records, Zhuang had a movie premiering in Singapore every other month in 1958 and 1959, sometimes two movies within the same month. The years between 1959 and 1961 were the peak for the production of Hokkien films, with half the total output of Hokkien films made during this period.

Some of Zhuang's films co-starred Lin Bo (凌波), known then as Xiao Juan (小娟), in her pre-stardom days before she made it really big in Asia with *The Love Eterne* (《梁山伯与祝英台》) in 1963. The two Hokkien entertainment darlings would sing and dance in the movies *Shrews From Afar* (《番婆弄》), etc, cutting a couple of very fashionable figures in the Hokkien movie era. Although *Shrews From Afar* was set in Singapore, the film did not shoot on location, "because I was just too busy", said Zhuang.

The 1960s was the heyday of her career. "At that time, I had four servants who attended to all my needs in the studio," Zhuang said. Such superstar status may not be rare for Hong Kong and Taiwanese artistes, but for local artistes, it was a treat.

And in an era when taking the plane was an uncommon experience, she flew like some would take the bus, "The first thing I do after I board a plane is to look for a vomit bag in case we meet with air turbulence."

In 1959, she started her own production company, Chong's Film Company, and continued touring and performing on promotional tours for her films. "In those days, I was often engaged by the film distributors to perform after each screening of the film during its run as part of the promotional activities. I would start performing from the first screening in the morning to the last screening at 11 at night, running around to all the theatres screening my film."

In 1962, she produced the movie *Romance at Lung Shan Temple* (《龙山寺之恋》) which was both a box office and critical hit in Taiwan. Unfortunately, it became a victim of the sensitive political climate then. The director, Bai Ke (白克), was accused of 'collaborating with communists' and arrested. He subsequently died in prison.

Zhuang was then leaving on a plane for a scheduled performance in Philippines. The authorities grounded the plane and detained her. She was interrogated but thankfully released not long after.

She recalled, "Apparently five calls were made to the authorities and I was eventually released. Till this day, I still have no idea who made those calls."

Zhuang's career continued unaffected by the incident. She would tour and perform till her retirement from the entertainment scene in 1971. The "King of Ballads" Chin Whai (秦淮) says Zhuang has a breadth of stage experience, "She performed in close to 1000 shows and had a huge fan base in Southeast Asia and Taiwan...She probably started the trend of performance tours. Few were like her, with the gift of the gab, great stage presence, and excellent singing and dancing skills. Many Taiwanese artistes of those days imitated her style."

On Zhuang's undying popularity and success, he said, "She is not one to sit on her laurels. To upgrade herself, she went to learn Beijing opera from a master. The training was tough. But she bit the bullet and persevered. Success did not come easy. Her diligence made a big difference."

Zhuang got married and settled down in Singapore. After her husband died, she focused her energies on her business and her daughter. Life seemed blissful till she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004. With her friends' encouragement and the support of her religion, she pulled through the painful chemotherapy. She then staged a series of charity concerts in Singapore and Taiwan in 2005. Many Taiwanese could still remember her from her days as the famous singer whose songs could be heard day in and day out. She was given the Taipei Honourary Award for her contributions to charity over the years.

Zhuang was last seen onstage in March 2010 singing for charity again, this time for the Thong Chai Charity Night, with a record amount of more than \$8 million raised for the hospital. Looking radiant and robust and not a day older than 60, even though she is almost 78, she sang so movingly that the ambassador of Thong Chai, Jackie Chan (成龙), joined her on stage. Her performance garnered one of the highest number of donation calls of the evening.

A fighter till the end, Zhuang Xue Fang aptly demonstrated the innate survival instinct within her honed all those years as a young travelling performer. Her achievements are all the more amazing given the times, where women in this part of the world are best seen and not heard. She is indeed a woman of her times, and beyond her times.

Quote

"Some people thought our performance was in poor taste. It is true we catered mainly to the audience. What's wrong with that? And where were the so-called critics when society needed them?" – Zhuang Xue Fang talking about her performances on tour in the 1950s.

Discography

巴乐风唱片公司出品 《高山青》

东南亚唱片公司出品 《就这样爱上你》 (1967)

《龙山寺之恋》 电影插曲专辑

《庄雪芳之歌》 (Chinese Popular Songs) (includes the song 《出人头地》)

美亚出品 《永远爱着你》

美亚出品 《泪的小花》

宝石之音 (五) 《雨水不要下》

宝石之音（六）《雨声》

宝石之音（九）《梦幻》

马标唱片《马来风光》

艺风出品《永远爱着你》

《庄雪芳 A Go Go》

CSF《庄雪芳泪痕》（1982）

CSF《庄雪芳专辑》（1983）

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