

Akiko Tetsuya's "The Last Star of the East: Brigitte Lin Ching Hsia and Her Films"

Article by Yunda Eddie Feng, DVDBeaver.com

Akiko Tetsuya, an intrepid, dedicated reporter, gained extraordinary access to Chinese superstar Brigitte Lin Ching Hsia, her friends, and her colleagues. In the process, Ms. Tetsuya has given cinephiles valuable insights into the actress's life and work as well as the Taiwan and Hong Kong movie industries.

When one mentions Hong-Kong Cinema, casual movie viewers might say, "Oh, I saw 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'", or, "That 'Hero' flick had a lot of pretty colors". Those of us in the know can do little but suppress our agony; after all, at the very least, people have seen the likes of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Hero". Chinese-language cinemas in general, like China itself, are on the rise on the global stage.

The current ascension of Chinese cinema has its roots in developments that took place during the 1980s and early-1990s, when "new wave" movements in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong broke free from the stifling traditions and conditions of the past. In Mainland China and Taiwan, the "new wave" movements were the results of moviemakers developing new methods of expression or examining serious social issues; the movies were not box-office hits at home. On the other hand, Hong Kong's "new wave" flicks--even the "artsy" ones--often competed successfully with mainstream fare for box-office dominance. For an American star like Tom Cruise, appearing in movies like "Magnolia" and "Eyes Wide Shut" might seem risky. For Hong-Kong star Maggie Cheung, appearing in movies like "In the Mood for Love" is as (financially) sound as appearing in Jackie Chan's "Police Story" series.

Though Hong-Kong cinema was extremely vibrant and dominated the Southeast-Asia market during the 1980s and 1990s, anxieties about the territory's return to Chinese rule in 1997 caused the movie industry to experience a severe downturn. In effect, this explains why today's Western audiences are more familiar with Mainland Chinese movies in general (like Zhang Yimou's "Hero" and "Raise the Red Lantern" or Chen Kaige's "Farewell My Concubine") than they are with Hong-Kong or Taiwan fare. (Ang Lee, though born in Taiwan, is based in the U.S. John Woo, Chow Yun-fat, and Jackie Chan are famous in America primarily because they have made movies here.) Americans' lack of familiarity with Hong-Kong movies is lamentable. Major talents like Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui are dead, and stars like Joey Wong, Cherie Chung, and Sally Yeh no longer make movies. Audiences here missed out on witnessing a golden era.

Brigitte Lin Ching Hsia was one of the biggest stars of 1980s/1990s Hong-Kong Cinema. In fact, she was a star in the Taiwan movie industry, too. At one point in time, it seemed like Chin Han, Charlie Chin, Lin Feng-jiao, and Brigitte Lin--"the two Chins and the two Lins"--divided Taiwan box-office receipts amongst themselves. The four regularly acted opposite one another. Lin Feng-jiao retired after she married Jackie Chan (yes, that Jackie Chan). The two Chins and Brigitte Lin carried on a love triangle for several years, and the trio even made "Cloud of Romance", which is about...yes, a love triangle (the Chins' movie roles were reversals of their real-life roles, with one being the pursuer and the other being the pursued).

Roughly the first third of Brigitte Lin's career was devoted to Taiwan melodramas. Later, she re-located to Hong Kong and appeared in period epics and martial-arts/fantasy flicks. Occasionally, she appeared in "Taiwan" productions (i.e. movies meant to be exhibited in the Mandarin dialect) such as the award-winning "Red Dust", a love story set in 1940s' China that deals with the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945 as well as the Chinese Civil War of 1945-1949. Of her starring roles, Brigitte Lin is best-known for "Peking Opera Blues", "Swordsman II" and its sequel "The East Is Red", and "The Bride With White Hair". Wong Kar-wai's devotees recognize her from "Chungking Express" and "Ashes of Time". Brigitte Lin herself is fond of "The Dream of the Red Chamber", which was based on one of the cornerstone's of Chinese literature and was also the first time Brigitte Lin played a man in a movie.

While searching on the Internet for current information about Brigitte Lin, I came across the website "Akiko Space" (<http://www.akikospace.com/>). "Akiko Space" is the personal website of Akiko Tetsuya, a Japanese journalist living in Los Angeles. To my surprise, I discovered that Ms. Tetsuya had written what is possibly the first book-length English-language appraisal of Brigitte Lin's career.

A labor of love that took at least a decade to complete, "The Last Star of the East: Brigitte Lin Ching Hsia and Her Films" is a collection of interviews conducted by Akiko Tetsuya. She had met with Brigitte Lin several times, and for the purposes of the book, she tracked down Brigitte Lin's associates in order to get as complete of an overview as possible. Ms. Tetsuya chatted with Brigitte Lin's schoolmates, who were her co-stars in her very first movie "Outside the Window" back in 1973. She chatted with Elaine Jin, another actress from Taiwan who also frequently made movies in Hong Kong (recently, Elaine Jin appeared in Edward Yang's highly-acclaimed "Yi Yi"). Director Ronny Yu and cinematographer Christopher Doyle rate brief appearances, and

director Tsui Hark--essentially a force of his own in Hong-Kong cinema--has his own chapter.

I won't get into the book's details because you can glean them for yourself when you read the interview transcriptions. However, you should know a little bit about Ms. Tetsuya's methodology. She was very brave and did not shy away from asking Brigitte Lin direct questions about her private life. For example, Ms. Tetsuya uncovered Brigitte Lin's honest opinions about Chin Han and Charlie Chin--the former being her long-time lover even though he was married to another woman and the latter being the one who actually proposed marriage to her. (As I mentioned earlier, the two Chins reversed roles in "Cloud of Romance".) These comments should not be considered gossip, though. In answering Ms. Tetsuya's questions, Brigitte Lin set the record straight with regards to many issues (at least from her point of view).

Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of reading Ms. Tetsuya's prose is absorbing her candor. At the beginning, Ms. Tetsuya acknowledges the fact that she approached the project as a fan devoted to memorializing and shedding light upon a public figure who has basically disappeared from the spotlight since she married in 1994. The book is not a scholarly treatise, and it should not be treated as such. Rather, the casual, conversational tone that Ms. Tetsuya obviously carried with her to her appointments probably put her interviewees at ease. Without turning into a sob piece, we see how difficult it was (and still is) to be a movie star in Hong Kong, appearing in five or six major productions per year and being hounded relentlessly by tabloid paparazzi. (As celebrity-obsessed as Americans seem to be, our media is not as out-of-control as the tabloid muckrakers in other countries.)

The book is not a lop-sided hagiography. Brigitte Lin takes responsibility for personal failings, and she expresses misgivings about having appeared in so many movies (at least 100) without always considering their merits. Also, while it's understandable that the book's participants would want to be on Brigitte Lin's good side, the inclusion of director Wong Jing's clearly negative comments about Brigitte Lin indicate Ms. Tetsuya's desire for an expansive, inclusive summation of her idol's impact. Wong Jing churns out so many movies each year that he is often unable to direct more than 50% of any given project. His "auteurship" is established mostly in post-production, when he edits footage for maximum audience-pleasing effect. Wong's attitude towards movies explains why he feels that Brigitte Lin mis-managed her career--meaning, he feels that she did not maximize her commercial prospects.

Recently, I had the opportunity to chat with Akiko Tetsuya about her book. She provided me with many insights into the dedication and perseverance that is required in order to get a book published. I must say that I learned as much from Akiko as I did from reading Brigitte Lin's replies to Akiko's queries.

Eddie: Hello, Akiko! How are you today?

Akiko: I am fine. Thank you.

Eddie: You are a Japanese journalist living in Los Angeles. You write articles for Japanese publications about the American movie industry. Please describe some of your "normal" or "every-day" activities. Do you attend a lot of press conferences? Do you write movie reviews or are you mostly involved in news reporting?

Akiko: Since I finished writing my book about Brigitte Lin, I am not working as much as I once did. I used to go to press junkets a lot.

Eddie: Do you write exclusively in Japanese, or do you also write in English for your publications?

Akiko: I write only in Japanese.

Eddie: Since you live in the United States and cover the American movie industry, do you find it difficult to keep up with contemporary developments in Japanese cinema?

Akiko: Yes, I haven't seen a lot of Japanese contemporary films, but that is okay because I am not covering Japanese films.

Eddie: "The Last Star of the East: Brigitte Lin Ching Hsia and Her Films" is your first English-language book. Had it not been for the fact that you are a big fan of Brigitte Lin, do you think that you would've attempted to write a book in a language other than Japanese?

Akiko: I do not think so. English is not my mother tongue. I am not very comfortable with speaking and writing in English formally.

Eddie: In the book's Preface, you tell readers that writing the book in Japanese was a very slow endeavor. Why was it difficult for you to write the book in your native language? Was it because you and Brigitte Lin conversed in English, thereby necessitating you to translate everything when writing in Japanese?

Akiko: Because the format/outline was not what I wanted to write. The Japanese book I was trying to write was "How I Succeeded in Meeting a Superstar from Taiwan/Hong Kong".

Eddie: When was the first time that you saw Brigitte Lin in a movie? Did you become a fan immediately, or did you become a fan after viewing several of her movies?

Akiko: I saw her in "Police Story" in the fall of 1994. That was the first time I saw her in a movie, but I'd heard her name mentioned elsewhere many times. At that time, I was not familiar with Hong Kong cinema. I became hooked on Hong Kong movies since then and tried to catch up. The following year, after seeing more of her movies, I decided to become her fan.

Eddie: What in particular about Brigitte Lin's acting or screen presence made you feel that you were watching someone special?

Akiko: She has charisma. I like her eyes' expressions.

Eddie: In writing your book, you must've encountered situations that challenged or negated what you previously thought about Brigitte Lin, just as you must've encountered situations that reinforced some of your feelings. What was the most-surprising thing that you realized about Brigitte Lin that you did not expect?

Akiko: She is very funny!

Eddie: The book's copyright year is 2005. I assume that the book was actually published and printed during 2005. Not counting the time that you spent on watching Brigitte Lin's movies and research, when did this project "officially" start? When did you first start sending letters to Brigitte Lin requesting interviews with her?

Akiko: My first "official" request for an interview was in 1996. I first interviewed her in 1997.

Eddie: You traveled extensively around the world in order to interview Brigitte Lin and her friends as well as her business associates. Obviously, you paid for a lot of your traveling expenses with your own money, but were you lucky enough to schedule some of these interviews with assignments from your Japanese publications?

Akiko: No, all of the expenses were from my own pocket because my assignments are for Hollywood movies.

Eddie: At your website, you mention that the book is a self-published effort. Does this mean that you paid for the printing costs with your own money?

Akiko: Yes. Unfortunately, even if I sold every copy of the book, I am still in red ink.

Eddie: Did Brigitte Lin or her friends ever offer to assist you financially with regards to this project?

Akiko: Yes, Brigitte did once. Not officially, though. I declined because if I got financial support, I had to obey her. I wanted to maintain independent control over the book.

Eddie: In many of her movies, Brigitte Lin either plays a man or plays women pretending to be men. In your interviews with Brigitte Lin, did she ever express a desire to challenge gender roles because she grew up in a conservative culture dominated by patriarchal Confucian values?

Akiko: She is interested in playing challenging roles, regardless of gender. She told me that she knew many gays and lesbians.

Eddie: While chatting with Brigitte Lin, the two of you realized the dramatic changes that have taken place during the 20th century. China and Japan were enemies during World War II, but the two of you cooperated for this book. This trend can be seen elsewhere: Takeshi Kaneshiro acting in Japanese, Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwan movies; Zhang Ziyi acting in Seijun Suzuki's "Operetta Tanuki Goten"; Ken Takakura acting in Zhang Yimou's "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles". Do you think Sino-Japanese joint productions will become a prominent aspect of the Chinese/Hong Kong/Taiwan and Japanese movie industries?

Akiko: All business is about money making. It does not matter what the nationalities of actors/actresses are if a movie makes money. I think the best example is "Sayuri" (aka "Memoirs of a Geisha").

Eddie: Generally, the people you met--including Brigitte Lin herself--seem reluctant to say that she has retired from acting. Based on your personal impressions, what kind of project do you think will entice Brigitte Lin to perform one last time? Will she be like her frequent co-star Joey Wong and pick a socially-relevant drama like "Shanghai Story", or will she pick something "fun" like a comedy or an action movie?

Akiko: She is interested in playing in an artistic movie, so it'd probably be a serious drama.

Eddie: That's all for today. Arigato, Akiko!

Akiko: You're welcome!

For more information about Akiko Tetsuya and her book "The Last Star of the East: Brigitte Lin Ching Hsia and Her Films", please visit "Akiko Space" (<http://www.akikospace.com/>).