

Bollywood moves in Taipei

Chan Yu-kuo, founder of Shiva Indian Dance Group, is among a growing number of Taiwanese who are taking an active interest in Indian culture

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

When it comes to Bollywood, or anything entertainment-related in India, Taiwanese tend to think of belly dancing, says Chan Yu-kuo (詹譽國). The 35-year-old dancer and Taichung native wants to change this view.

On Sunday night, his Shiva India Dance Group (西瓦印度舞團) performed classical Indian folk and Bollywood dance in a sold-out show at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall's 400-seat lecture auditorium.

One aim of the program, Chan said in an interview last week, was to show how the dancing of Bollywood movies is connected to India's ancient performing arts.

Much of the music on Sunday was modern Indian pop played from a CD (with a nice live music interlude of three musicians playing a sitar, tablas and harmonium), but the lively dance moves were traditional.

Shiva India Dance Group, whose dozen or so members are all Taiwanese, performed routines based on *Kathak*, a classical dance from Northern India that features intricate foot-tapping and hand movements, and *mujra*, a suggestive dance once performed by female courtesans for royalty and the upper class.

For Chan, a devotee of both forms, the visual aspect was equally important, with a costume change for each of the 13 dance pieces.

As the only male dancer, Chan dressed in traditional kurtas, while the women donned colorful, sparkling saris and *lenghas*, the skirt and blouse combination often seen in Bollywood movies. Chan had all of the clothes tailor-made in New Delhi.

"We want people to see the real India," he said. "Not what Taiwanese people see as India, but what Indian people see as India."

Shiva India Dance Group's performance received support from the India-Taipei Association, India's representative office in Taiwan, which helped to publicize the group's show.

Chan, known by friends and students as "Ricky Q," is a "passionate Indophile" and one among a growing number of Taiwanese with an interest in Indian culture, said Pradeep Rawat, Director General of the India-Taipei Association.

"In fact, there are more than 20 individual dance groups today in various cities of Taiwan passionately pursuing popular and classical Indian dance," Rawat wrote in an e-mail to the *Taipei Times*.

An increasing number of Taiwanese are traveling to India for "culture-related tourism," as well as showing interest in yoga and traditional Indian spas, according to Rawat.

Film has been another sign of a surging interest. Rawat said an Indian film festival organized by the association in January sold out in less than two days.

"More importantly," he wrote, "starting last year, Indian movies are now being released commercially in local theaters."

It was a Bollywood film that originally attracted Chan to Indian dance. He said the 2002 film *Devdas* inspired him to quit his job as an

aerobics instructor and travel to New Delhi to study *Kathak* dance.

"I think that film had an important influence on creating 'India fans' in Taiwan," Chan said. "We discovered that India was not what we were accustomed to seeing and that it was not poor and without joy."

Chan was enchanted by the colorful dress, rich facial expressions and refined hand movements of the dancers he saw in *Devdas*, which led him to seek out the one of movie's choreographers, Panjit Birju Maharaj, a world-renowned *Kathak* dancer, poet and singer.

It took a full year of e-mail correspondence to convince Maharaj that he would make a devoted student. Since 2004, Chan has made yearly trips to New Delhi, spending three months out of the year to study with his "guru." If it weren't for financial and family obligations in Taiwan, Chan says, he would move to India.

He started Shiva India Dance Group in 2005 to teach and promote what he regards as "orthodox" forms of Indian folk dance.

Kathak, which depicts stories from Hindu mythology, has a distinctive rhythmic element — performers stamp their feet to match or play off the complex beats performed by onstage musicians, who commonly play sitars and tablas.

For Chan, *Kathak's* biggest appeal lies in how it combines storytelling and body movement.

"You have to take a story and let the audience understand what's happening just from your expression," he said. "[A performer] will use his hand, just one part of his hand, to express a very specific thing — this attracted me very much."

Kathak dance is beautiful for its "humanity and spirituality," Chan said. "It lets me be myself."

Shiva holds seasonal performances and offers classes on classical Indian folk and Bollywood dance. For more information, visit its Web site (in Chinese only) at tw.myblog.yahoo.com/shiva-dance/archive?l=f&id=25

For information on the India-Taipei Association, go to www.india.org.tw



The Shiva Indian Dance Group performs and teaches classical Indian folk and Bollywood dance. PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHIVA INDIAN DANCE GROUP



[CINEMA]

Hong Kong's beleaguered film sector hopes for rebirth

Observers are optimistic that a new generation of directors and growing demand from China will help the city's film industry regain some of its former glory

BY PETER BRIEGER
AFP, HONG KONG

Hong Kong's beleaguered film industry was a global powerhouse just two decades ago, pumping out 300 movies a year and boasting a fan base that stretched across Asia.

Led by up-and-coming action stars Jackie Chan (成龍) and Chow Yun-fat (周潤發) along with director John Woo (吳宇森), the city's film sector was among the world's most prolific by the late 1980s, trailing only Hollywood and Bollywood.

Woo — whose later directorial credits include *Face/Off* and *Mission: Impossible II* — won acclaim for his gritty 1992 cop thriller *Hard Boiled*, which became synonymous with the wildly popular Hong Kong action genre.

"That's when Hong Kong film was in its golden age," said director Mabel Cheung (張婉婷), who jointly produced the drama *Echoes of the Rainbow* (歲月神偷), which won the Berlin International Film Festival's Crystal Bear Award in February.

"There was a big market for Hong Kong films with all of these big names back then who were just starting. It was a very exciting time."

As the Hong Kong Film Awards drew to a close Sunday night, Cheung and others said they hoped the hard-hit sector would enjoy a revival by tapping the mainland Chinese market.

The industry's swift and brutal fall from grace came as Hollywood lured away Woo and other film giants, moviegoers at home and abroad grew tired of the city's formulaic action plots and illicit piracy hammered profits.

Some of Hong Kong's traditional markets, including Taiwan, South Korea and Malaysia, also began developing their own cinema sectors, another blow to its once-mighty film industry, which splashed onto the international scene in the early 1970s with late kung fu legend Bruce Lee's (李小龍) martial arts blockbusters.

By 2003, the sector was a shell of its former self with spiraling box office receipts and producing just 55 films a year.

"Audiences got tired of the same film over and over again," Cheung said. "They demanded new ideas. For a while, Hong Kong films lost direction."

Now there are early signs Hong Kong's film sector may claw back some of its former glory with a new generation of directors eager to make a name for themselves, experts said.

"There is new blood pumping into an old industry and there is a general trend worldwide that people want to see local films," said Jacob Wong (王慶輝), curator of the Hong Kong International Film Festival Society.

The number of Hong Kong productions — estimated to contribute about US\$4.25 billion annually to the local economy



Hong Kong director John Woo oversees shooting of the Chinese epic film *Red Cliff* near Beijing in September 2007. With a budget of US\$80 million, *Red Cliff* is the most expensive Asian movie to date. PHOTO: BILLOMBERG

— has been rising in recent years and the government is pouring money into a film development fund.

"That's how *Echoes of the Rainbow* got made," Cheung said, referring to the fund. "Otherwise, it might not have seen the light of day."

Hong Kong's stylistic filmmaking still holds wide appeal, Wong said, pointing to American director Martin Scorsese's Oscar-winning 2006 film *The Departed*, which was a remake of the 2002-2003

Infernal Affairs (無間道) trilogy.

Another homegrown success story, *Bodyguards and Assassins* (十月圍城), was one of the best-selling movies on the Chinese mainland last year, he said.

"It's not a watershed, although it marks a turning point," Wong added.

Still, the industry's future success depends largely on whether it can become a major player in the fast-growing mainland Chinese market, observers said.

"The [industry] is coming back because of the huge market in China," said Brian Chung (鍾偉雄), chief executive of the Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association.

"There are maybe 5,000 movie screens in China right now. In five years, there will be 10,000. More screens means more money."

Hong Kong directors, who are already accustomed to tailoring films to different markets, have an edge over mainland producers, who often have a less international outlook, and are familiar with Chinese audiences' tastes, Chung said.

"The advantage Hong Kong directors have is that they can make a commercial film better than a director in China," he said.

"The Chinese director treats the work as art, but the Hong Kong director will think of the film as a product suitable for the market."

There is also room for the Hong Kong and mainland film sectors to join

forces with co-productions such as 2008 historical war epic *Red Cliff* (赤壁), which smashed Chinese box-office records, observers said.

Wong, from the film festival society, agreed that Hong Kong directors should focus on places "where people use chopsticks," but said producing a film in censorship-heavy mainland China can limit what sort of films get made.

"I'm cautiously optimistic about the industry," he said. "But I'm pessimistic about quality."

Perry Lam (林沛理), editor of Hong Kong arts and culture magazine *Muse*, is not convinced the mainland market will be enough to ensure the industry can turn itself around.

"One can easily find cogent reasons for arguing that the future of Hong Kong cinema lies in embracing the Chinese market," Lam said.

"Nevertheless, I smell more desperation than inspiration in the latest race to make the Hong Kong cinema mainland-friendly."

Correction: The Performance Notes box that accompanied Friday's preview of the Silk Road Ensemble with Yo-Yo Ma's (馬友友·絲路之旅在臺灣) Taiwan tour (*Smooth as Silk*) did not contain information on the Taichung leg of the tour, which takes place this Saturday at Taichung Fulfillment Amphitheatre. The ensemble also performs in Taipei (on Thursday) and Kaohsiung (on Sunday). All performances start at 7:30pm. For more information, visit www.silkroadproject.org. To order tickets, go to www.mna.com.tw/events_EN.asp