

THE SEVEN LITTLE FORTUNES

By Mike Fury



It is no surprise that many of the most prolific and highly regarded Hong Kong movie professionals of the last century had their skills defined in the tough and demanding world of Chinese Opera. Sammo and the rest of his classmates, many of whom also developed great careers, were conditioned to the high demands of action cinema as a result of their intense, laborious introduction to stage combat - studying under Master Yu Jim-yuen at the China Drama Academy. The reasons behind children attending Opera school are greatly varied. Some families saw the Opera Schools as great, prestigious establishments where the honour of performing on an International stage may one day be attained. Some children struggled in strictly academic environments and therefore studying Opera was seen as something different that certain children may engage with more effectively - while ensuring a strict, regimented routine that would ingrain discipline into their characters. For many parents it was a practical 'investment', particularly for families who weren't necessarily able to raise their children in the way they'd have liked due to intense working hours, lack of money, or a multitude of other reasons. Jackie Chan's parents moved to Australia, for example, and having been in trouble at school, living and studying under the roof of Master Yuen was believed to be the best and most productive option. After visiting the school, taking a tour of the grounds and witnessing the students at work, the family would sign a contract for an agreed number of years during which time the child would be Master Yuen's responsibility. The philosophy of this arrangement being that a child would be given the environment, education and tools to master the skills required for a career in the Opera. Under their Master's guidance, they would have the support and resources to achieve great things. Any and all profits acquired from performances would go straight to the Master as the sole income for the school and would pay for the upkeep of the academy's facilities and fund further performances. In this environment, it was stated that a child who is talented enough may one day rise to stardom and ultimately bring great honour to their family. Upon joining the school, the hierarchical system would see the new student join the bottom rung of the ladder, which

extended to both mealtimes (being served last) and social status within the academy. New students were also given stage names incorporating 'Yuen' into their title, in honour of their Master. Jackie Chan was originally known as Yuen Lo and Sammo Hung as Yuen Lung. Others have kept these stage names today, notably Yuen Biao and Yuen Kwai, better known as Corey Yuen.

According to accounts by both Sammo and fellow classmate Jackie Chan, the days at the academy were exceptionally tough. With morning exercise starting at 5am, a gruelling day comprising 18 or more hours of varied training and classes would be the prescribed method for sculpting the children into the next league of great Opera performers. There were classes that taught acrobatic and combat routines, with an unconditional emphasis on perfecting the movements, regardless of sickness, pain and even injury. Other classes would teach subjects that were fundamental to the Opera, such as music and singing, and the children would also study academic subjects like history and literature. The nature of the work was very demanding, but was seen as reflective of the hours and sheer volume of work that lay within a career in the Opera.

The Seven Little Fortunes ('Chat Siu Fook' in Cantonese) were a performance troupe put together by Master Yu Jim-yuen. The best and brightest were handpicked for public performances that would generate the sole profit for the school, and honour the establishment and its Master by pleasing audiences and cementing the good reputation of the academy. Despite its name, the Seven Little Fortunes usually comprised of approximately fourteen or fifteen members, seven of whom would appear onstage for any one performance. Those selected would often embody special talents and subtleties in their performances which Master Yuen saw as integral to the variety of characters and performances in the Opera - for example, Sammo was renowned for his Martial Arts skill, while Yuen Wah was arguably the most natural acrobat. This reflected the type of roles the young performers would usually play, as those elements would

emphasise their strengths and ensure the best overall performance. It has been said by many former students of the school that the pressure to deliver an outstanding performance and please their Master was immense. Master Yuen was concerned not only about the quality of the performance, but also the audience's reaction. After all, the reputations of the Opera Schools travelled far and wide and the quality of performances was believed to be reflective of the Master's competence. As a result, the members of the Seven Little Fortunes were pushed hard at the academy, and pushed themselves even harder onstage. Reportedly, one fear that propelled them all was the knowledge that every single member was replaceable, and there was absolutely nothing forgivable about making mistakes during a performance.

When trying to comprehend the complexity and difficulty of Chinese Opera, it is worth considering the sheer range and length of the parts that would often be involved. Single scenes often last a very long time - fifteen minutes or more - and a whole performance could include elaborate combinations of fighting, acrobatics, singing and acting. Combine this with the actors wearing heavy robes and costumes, vast quantities of makeup that prevent the skin from breathing, the pressures of remembering lines, cues, all the words to a lengthy and complex song, all the while performing on a hot stage to a large audience. For most adults this would be a difficult task, yet these were children tackling these very same challenges, and impressively with very favourable and popular results. Eventually the troupe became celebrities and would often be recognised in town and asked to appear in photos with devoted fans. This made Master Yuen very happy and proved the success and reputation of the school was soaring. As time went on and public performances of the academy continued, there were new opportunities emerging in the film business for young Martial Artist's and stuntmen who could fight or take a fall with convincing delivery. As a result, production companies such as the fast growing Shaw Brothers Studios were constantly hiring from the most sought-after Opera Schools, for anything from extras to stuntmen. 'Big Brother' Sammo was one of the first to become involved in this world, and would proudly and excitedly report back to his younger brothers at the school about the work that goes on in the movie business. This undoubtedly captivated the younger students who soon dreamed of experiencing this world for themselves. Children being hired for film projects had actually been going on years before, but when the Opera students were very young children they would most often be hired as extras. As teenagers and young adults, they were hired for physically demanding fight and stunt scenes that were often poorly paid. By this time they did receive a small piece of the salary collected by Master Yuen, but according to Jackie Chan it was only \$5 HKD of a \$75 wage. This had worked when the children were very young and it ensured the academy was adequately financed, but as the students got older, attitudes understandably changed. Sympathising with working



under these conditions, especially as young men, Master Yuen subsequently paid a much higher percentage of their earnings. But having been exposed to the exciting opportunities that lay within the movie business, many students were now setting their sights beyond the world of Chinese Opera. The film industry offered new opportunities far removed from the gruelling world of Opera training that had dominated their lives for the last decade. It was also generally seen that Chinese Opera was a dying art form and as audiences got smaller, fewer students were being brought to the academy. The growing film business in Hong Kong and particularly the emphasis on Martial Arts movies meant that many new opportunities were now available. With the requirement for physically capable performers, Opera students realised that their years of dedicated training could be applied on a new and exciting stage. With the skilled performers of the Seven Little Fortunes, along with many stars of other successful troupes joining the film industry, a new league of movie stars were born. Jackie Chan has written that their generation was the last to be raised in the Opera - an old fashioned upbringing in a changing, modernising Hong Kong. This makes their years at the academy a historic and important time which ultimately laid the foundations for many future stars of Hong Kong action cinema.

Where are they now?

Many members of the Seven Little Fortunes went on to work extensively in the Hong Kong film industry. This is by no means a complete list of everyone who ever performed in the troupe but aims to summarise the work of the most widely recognised performers and their contributions to Hong Kong cinema.

Sammo Hung (Yuen Lung):

After a successful early career as an Action Director and occasional supporting player in many Kung-fu movies of the 1970s, Sammo reaffirmed his 'Big Brother' status as a highly talented filmmaker. Despite building a successful parallel career as an action star, much of Sammo's popularity has stemmed from the incredible body of work he has Directed. He is also responsible for introducing many of his former classmates to the film industry, frequently recruiting them to work on his projects. As a Director, some of his most popular work includes Iron Fisted Monk, The Prodigal Son and Warriors Two. In addition to Directing the majority of the 'three dragons' movies starring himself, Jackie Chan and

Yuen Biao, he also spearheaded the popular Lucky Stars comedy series, in which he appeared as a regular cast member. Despite his films being distributed in other parts of the world, they remained the exclusive treasures of Hong Kong and action cinema fans, undoubtedly with prior interest in the genre. This changed when he achieved wide commercial success with the hit CBS TV series *Martial Law*, which aired from 1998 for two seasons. The show gained an instant following and brought Sammo to the mainstream Western market. Today he continues working both in front of and behind the camera, with recent efforts including *SPL*, *Dragon Squad* and the most recent *Wilson Yip/Donnie Yen* collaboration, *Ip Man*. He is also busy working on *Howling Arrow*, his first Directorial project for twelve years. His 'Big Brother' status extends not only to his former classmates, but across the whole Hong Kong film industry.

Jackie Chan (Yuen Lo):

Jackie has become one of the most popular international action stars of all time, having created his signature action/comedy formula in Hong Kong cinema; he has successfully imported his unique brand of entertainment for Western audiences. After starring in a number of unappreciated Kung-fu films throughout the 1970s including his string of commercially unsuccessful projects under Director Lo Wei, Jackie catapulted to popularity after he starred in Yuen Woo-ping's *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*. His Directorial debut, *The Fearless Hyena* proved to be a major success and marks the beginning of an equally impressive career as a Director. He saw further box office hits throughout the 1980s including *The Young Master*, *Police Story* and his now legendary collaborations with Opera classmates, Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao.

Despite unsuccessful early attempts to break the American market, Jackie finally earned wide international recognition for *Rumble in the Bronx*. Soon his vast back-catalogue of movies was being re-released in the West and he continued his ever-growing success with projects such as *Mr Nice Guy*, *The Medallion* and the *Rush Hour* trilogy. Today he continues working as a major star in both Hong Kong and the US.

Yuen Biao:

Following his early work as a stuntman and action Director, Yuen Biao was finally given the chance to take centre stage under the Directorial eye of Opera School buddies, Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan. With great action-vehicles to showcase his talents, he established his unique image, fighting style and wholly charming personality in box office hits like *Knockabout*, *The Magnificent Butcher* and *The Young Master*. Showing off his remarkable athleticism and acrobatic skill, Yuen Biao has dominated the screen ever since in countless films, constantly demonstrating his incredible physical range and talents as an actor. Arguably his finest work as an action star can be seen in the 'three dragons' films;

Project A, *Wheels on Meals* and *Dragons Forever*, in which fans see the best demonstrations of Sammo and Jackie's multi-skilled 'little brother'. Other popular work has included *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*, *The Iceman Cometh* and the original *Once Upon a Time in China*.

Although he remains active in film and television, today he can be seen focusing on dramatic as well as action roles. Recent highlights include the underrated character-drama *Boxer's Story* and the recent Hong Kong TVB Series *The Ultimate Crime Fighter*.

Corey Yuen (Yuen Kwai):

Much like his classmates, Corey Yuen began his career multi-tasking as an actor, stuntman and occasional Action Director. He soon established himself as an exceptionally gifted Martial Arts performer who seemed to carry a natural instinct for crafting incredible action sequences. His long proven talents as an Action Director finally led to an offer for his very first Directorial project; *Ninja in the Dragon's Den* with Conan Lee. He continued his string of successes working with many renowned industry figures, creating what would become some of the best-loved action films of the 1980s and 1990s. These included *Above the Law*, *Fong Sai Yuk* and the early Jean Claude Van Damme cult-classic *No Retreat No Surrender*. He also co-founded the company Eastern Productions with Jet Li, which produced many popular action films of the 1990s. As his reputation continued growing, he was invited to work in Hollywood on many major projects, bringing his unique and energetic action style to American audiences. To this day he has worked on grand-scale productions like *Lethal Weapon 4*, *The One*, *The Transporter* and *DOA: Dead or Alive*. He remains one of the most prolific and highly respected Action Directors working today.

Yuen Wah:

With his powerful and versatile Martial Arts style, after leaving the Opera, Yuen Wah rose to prominence by playing Bruce Lee's stunt double in a number of his films. In fact, it is reported that Bruce was so impressed with this young stuntman's abilities that he took him under his wing and introduced him to Jeet Kune Do. Having worked as a supporting actor and stuntman throughout the 1970s, his services were enlisted by Shaw Brothers Studios for many of their projects throughout the 1980s, including *Duel of the Century* and *Tales of a Eunuch*. 'Big Brother' Sammo brought him into many high-profile Golden Harvest projects where he saw increased opportunities, gaining wider recognition for his work.

He was also collaborating with an ever greater range of stars and fellow Action Directors. As an actor, his breakthrough came when he was cast as the creepy giggling general in Sammo's *Martial Arts/war* movie crossover *Eastern Condors*. Another memorable performance was delivered only one year later when he played the iconic cigar puffing villain in *Dragons Forever*.

Painted Faces



With his lean, chiselled facial features and tall, thin frame, Yuen Wah soon established himself as a great character actor who could always be relied upon to deliver quirky and engaging performances, in addition to his athletic and incredibly fast fighting style. He has appeared in many other popular films including Jackie Chan's *Police Story III*, *Kick Boxer* and Stephen Chow's massive international hit, *Kung Fu Hustle*, working predominantly as an actor but occasionally assisting as an Action Director. He remains busy working in film and television and continues broadening his fan base with new and varied projects.

Yuen Mo:

After leaving the Opera School, much like his classmates Yuen Mo worked both as an Action Director and stuntman, which occasionally led to supporting roles in projects he was working on. His notable credits as an actor include his work with Sammo in *The Magnificent Butcher*, *The Prodigal Son* and *Millionaire's Express* (aka: *Shanghai Express*). Despite enjoying recognition as a reliable and highly skilled supporting player, Yuen Mo's interest always remained behind the scenes and so throughout the latter part of the 1980s and far into the 1990s he worked almost exclusively as an Action Director, rarely appearing onscreen. Credits from this period of his career include *Drunken Master II*, *Circus Kids* and Sammo Hung's own production, *Don't Give a Damn*.

His last known work in the film business is for a role in Lam Chin-wai's *Leopard Hunting* in 1998. Beyond this, his current activities are unknown.

Yuen Tak:

Having worked as a stuntman and supporting actor in Kung-fu movies of the late 1970s - mostly starring his former Opera classmates - Yuen Tak was subsequently offered the chance to star in *The Master*, a Shaw Bros production capitalising on the success of *Drunken Master*. While it was a great opportunity which highlighted his strongest attributes, the film is unfortunately remembered as an all-too-familiar clone of Jackie Chan's hit two years earlier. Yuen Tak continued working as an actor and Action Director, collaborating with Corey Yuen on high-profile projects like *She Shoots Straight* and *Fong Sai Yuk*, which won an award for its action choreography. Further examples of his work can be seen in *The Iceman Cometh*, *Once Upon a Time in China 3* and *Operation Scorpio*. His greatest moment as an onscreen star is generally considered to be the duel against ballet turned action actress Moon Lee in *Angels 2*, one of the most memorable scenes in the film.

Despite an extensive body of work to his name, fans have often commented that he has yet to find a project to truly demonstrate the full range of his abilities. He remains extremely busy in the industry today, and in more recent years his action choreography can be seen



**Jackie Chan, Sifu Yu Jim-yuen, Sammo Hung
at the Miracles premiere in 1989**

in films such as 2000 AD, The Myth and Dante Lam's 2009 actioner Sniper.

Yuen Mun:

Establishing himself as a talented and reliable Martial Arts actor, Yuen Mun soon became a first choice player to be included in the evolving and highly demanding world of late 1970s action cinema. Having appeared in small roles in Shaw Brothers films including Heroes of the Underground and The Fighting Fool, he quickly moved up the ranks when he co-starred in Hell's Windstaff and The Master Strikes with Casanova Wong.

Soon after this, he returned to Shaw Brothers where he appeared in further projects, namely Lovers Blades alongside former Opera classmate Yuen Tak. Despite his drive and ongoing efforts in the business, Yuen Mun reportedly suffered a heart attack in 1981 which sadly forced him to retire from the film industry. It is believed that he now works in advertising.

Yuen Choi:

Much like his former classmates, Yuen Choi established himself as a supporting actor and stuntman, but with less emphasis on action choreography work. He appeared as a stuntman in Bruce Lee films and as a supporting actor in John Woo's Directorial debut, The

Young Dragons and several Shaw Brothers films of this era. After taking a few years off during the latter part of the 1980s, Yuen Choi returned and started working as a producer, predominantly on projects for the company; New Treasurer Films which have included Direct Line and more recently Boxing Hero with Terence Yin. In 2007, he also worked on the big-budget historical drama The Valiant Ones New with former classmate Yuen Wah.

Yuen Qui:

Despite the impressive talents developed during her time at the academy, after leaving the Opera and pursuing the film industry Yuen Qui found that there were relatively few opportunities for female stunt and action performers at that time.

Having married in 1974, she continued pursuing film work and subsequently appeared in the James Bond adventure; The Man with the Golden Gun, as well as Hong Kong movies; Dreadnaught and Disciples Of The 36th Chamber starring Kill Bill star Gordon Liu Chia-hui. After taking a twenty year break from the industry, she made a surprise return in Stephen Chow's International hit Kung Fu Hustle and can also be seen in Kung Fu Majong and the popular Project A TV series. Yuen Qui remains active as an actress and is said to have further projects on the horizon.