

# Movietown where the pace is furious

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Appearances can be deceiving – and nowhere is this more true than at Shaw’s Movietown.

A self-contained community of papier-mâché splendour, of cardboard fortresses and castles of straw, it’s a village in the northern hills of Kowloon near the Communist Chinese border where every aspect of movie making is covered – from the pre-production to filming and post production.

A multi-storey administrative building oversees a myriad of taverns, temples, brothels, pagodas, palaces, “ancient” streets and Chinese drawing rooms. Stables stocked with specially trained horses abut a “concentration camp.”

Movie magnate, billionaire and philanthropist, Run Run Shaw, CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) is the soft-spoken and very accessible “overlord” commanding a staff of 1500. A single telephone call was all it took to arrange an interview.

“His door is always open,” says Mr. Ronnie Poon, Movietown’s publicity manager.

“Business is business,” Mr. Shaw tells his staff, “and if you have something to discuss, well come in and we’ll discuss it.”

A former theatre operator, Mr. Shaw left China for Singapore at 19, and with his brother Runme, opened a movie theatre. Within a few years they owned 120 theatres. At the same time, the brothers undertook the building of an overseas distribution market for Chinese films.

Three decades later they moved to Hong Kong to start a film business of their own. Bringing in experts from all over the world to train technicians and artists, they also arranged for their staff to study film-making worldwide to learn the gamut of industry trades. In Hong Kong, musicals had been the mainstay, eventually followed by action films.

Among the Kung Fu fisticuff and swordplay performers, a charismatic young actor named Bruce Li emerged, introducing the Kung Fu flying kick and soon the Kung Fu craze began to find a global market.

Today Shaw’s Movietown is the largest privately owned movie studio in the world and Mr. Shaw one of the industry’s wealthiest tycoons.

With China beginning to crack open its doors to the world (following President Nixon's historic and politically bold rapprochement with Chairman Mao) and the growing interest in all things Oriental, Asia is the new frontier Mr. Shaw says.

As we stroll past the "Great Wall of China" on the grounds of his compact dominion, Mr. Shaw speaks in terms of day shifts and night shifts. The action never stops. There are as many as 12 films in production at any given time with a new film goes into production an average of every nine days.

There are four staff dormitories (mostly units of self-contained flats), five blocks of administration buildings including a 30 person publicity department, 16 permanent outdoor sets, warehouses for storing and shipping films, 12 sound stages as well as film processing, editing, sound recording and dubbing rooms. Resident composers and musicians work on film scores on site.

Movietown runs its own training school where actors learn the stylized dancing, Chinese boxing and acting characteristic of Chinese films.

The selection and training of each new crop of actors falls to Mr. Chu Yuk-wah, formerly a scriptwriter, director and producer for a small film company in Shanghai. An average of 1,400 applicants vie for every place, chosen according to "deportment, appearance, manners, acting ability, and ease of conversation," says Mr. Chu. The final auditions take place before a board of five film directors and television producers.

The Shaw in-house course takes a full year – half the year devoted to classroom theory and the other half to studio work during which time the student makes about HK\$500 (US\$100) a month. There are no school fees.

Everyone, from stars to carpenters lives rent free. Mr. Shaw considers them all to be part of his family so no one gets preferential treatment. Living on site is optional, and most prefer to do so, Mr. Poon says, in order to save on travel time. One of the older buildings housing Taiwanese stars is more dormitory-like with separate bedrooms and common kitchen and sitting room facilities.

For actors who must come from the island side of Hong Kong there are shuttle buses to ferry them to and from the studios for their 12 hour days.

Karen Yeh one of Shaw's promising and highly recognized starlets is one such commuter. It was more difficult to arrange an interview with Ms. Yeh than her mogul boss. "We don't want to promote favoritism," Mr. Poon explains.

Ms. Yeh lives with and contributes to the support of her mother and father and eight siblings. Up at 6:30 she commutes by shuttle bus every day from their apartment in North Point.

As we continue our tour of the outdoor sets, several dogs run free, past Chinese “courtesans” in satins and brocades, pearls intertwined into towering sculpted hairdos, glimpses of platform shoes beneath their flowing robes as they clump across the cobbles. Warriors in topknots and Levis pause for a cigarette. And everywhere there is hammering and banging as walls and ramparts of tin, paper and plastic are erected or torn down.

The factory precision of mass production belies the imagined “glamour” of the industry.

On this unusually cold but bright day, a piercing wind whips across the top of the hill where the main sets are housed. Actors and technicians scurry from one building to the next, the chilly wind nipping at clothing not designed for a bitterly biting day.

Mr. Shaw directs me to one of the sound stages, not much more than a gloomy shed, where filming is in progress. We clumsily grope our way up a flight of rickety stairs to a loft where a brothel scene of sorts is underway.

Several actresses (three American and four European) huddle in bathrobes around a small electric heater, shivering over glasses of hot tea. The Chinese actresses, all in generic period costume, and appearing a little less chilled, chat amiably with the be-wigged Europeans while another foreign actress wrapped in both a robe and a fur coat lies, curled up in a Chinese bed waiting for her scene.

This somewhat surreal scene will translate into *Virgins of the Seven Seas*, a soft porn kung-fu, sword wielding cartoonish romp about five western women kidnapped by Chinese pirates and sold to a brothel where they are to be trained to become prostitutes. They are rescued by some upstanding local citizens who help them escape by teaching them a rip-roaring form of martial arts.

It’s a rare German Chinese co-production directed by Ernst Hofbauer and Keui Chih-hung and produced by Shaw Brothers, featuring nearly naked western women duking it out with buffoonish bad guys in executioner type costumes, confounding them not only with their super human Kung Fu abilities but by wagging their bare breasts under their noses.

Tamara Elliot one of the high seas “virgins” came to the gig via roles in *Mission Impossible* and *Mannix*.

She enjoys working in a Chinese film, she says because “there is no star business” here. No one has priority – everyone works as an equal. The only inequality an observer might perceive is between the clothed and the unclothed. Elliot described the crew as “really sweet.”

Most Shaw films are shot without a soundtrack to facilitate dubbing into other Chinese languages as well as English, French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese.

As Mr. Shaw and I prepare to continue on our way, German producer Wolf C. Hartwig eagerly offers himself up for an interview. Mr. Shaw diplomatically suggests time does not permit so we gingerly descend the shaky steps and cross the artificial flag stones, stepping back out into blinding sunshine and the “China” of another era.

We are on the way to the canteen, now an improvised hospital where a TVB television series about the day to day life of ordinary Hong Kong folks is being shot. About 50 people through the “waiting room” all of them extras, hired and paid on a daily basis.

Mr. Shaw established TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited) in 1973 which has quickly grown into a multi-billion dollar TV empire creating sitcoms, drama series, documentaries and musical and variety shows. TVB is the leading producer of Chinese programs in the world.

We leave the “hospital” to inspect the costume warehouse where more than 80,000 traditional Chinese costumes are stored in huge metal sliding drawer-like closets. They’re filed according to period, style and type under a system not unlike the Dewey Decimal System. Richly embroidered, many of the highly decorated “royal” outfits are invaluable and therefore, unlike the actors, merit an air-conditioned environment.

It surprises few that Mr. Shaw, action movie king, and entrepreneur extraordinaire, has interests in the finer aspects of culture as well. The name Run Run Shaw can be found on hospital and library buildings as well as the buildings of more than 50 universities, recipients of millions of dollars from their film emperor benefactor, who has a keen interest in social service and culture.

He still fondly remembers the first film Movietown produced, a musical called *Eternal Love*. “It was gorgeous,” he sighs. “The settings the costumes, were out of this world. It ran for years and people have told us they saw it 100 times. No one had ever seen such beauty.”