

# Fragile Orchid

Like a newly born fawn, stumbling and just beginning to find its own feet, or a transfigured butterfly taking its first flight, a young Malaysian actress suddenly shot into prominence in the late 1950s. Ngim looks back on an all-too short efflorescence



While P. Ramlee was still at his height making movies for adoring but mostly local audiences, Malaysian cinema was entering a new era around the time of the country's independence in 1957.

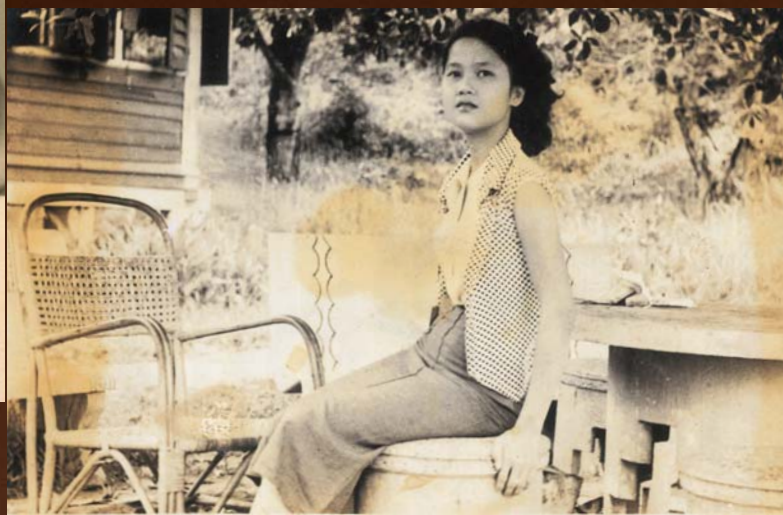
As entertainment went in those days – much like it was just about everywhere else – nothing matched the anticipation and excitement of the movies, and no idols were more worshipped than movie stars. Everyone had a favorite star, often mimicking the appearance or mannerisms of that actor.

Of course, being a star also had – and has – its downside. Like royalty, the lives of movie stars were not entirely their own – they were the property of the public (or more accurately and less forgivingly, of the studios). The gossip and rumor mills were also busy churning away – and it usually wasn't news of the p.r. sort. And with the spotlight came other perils and pitfalls, not least of all the harsh and unforgiving glare of the spotlight itself. When the spotlight became a microscope.

Orchid Wong 胡姬 was one who burst forth like a shooting star and then quickly flamed out. Her story is by no means unique, but as with the rest, serves as a cautionary tale about the traps and snares of stardom,

She was born Wong Teng Meng, in Canton, China in 1939. Her family moved to Malaysia when she was five. She started her working life in Kuala Lumpur as a primary school teacher. But, like many others her age, she yearned for movie stardom, and herself idolized and wanted to be like one of the greatest – Vivien Leigh, Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With The Wind*. Unlike Vivien Leigh, who trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London and started her career at the theater, Wong, almost purely on impulse, decided to audition for a part in a movie that was to be filmed in Singapore.

To her astonishment, she landed the part of Fung Ling, the female lead role in the movie *Lion City* 獅子城. One of the first things she did was change her first name to Orchid.



The movie was filmed in 1960 at Cathay-Kris Studios in Singapore, and was directed by Yi Sui, a young Taiwanese filmmaker. It was the first Chinese-speaking movie made in this part of the world; previously, most other locally produced movies were Malay-speaking, and shot in Singaporean studios. Orchid Wong was also the first Chinese from Malaysia to star in a Mandarin movie made in Singapore.

In 1960 that was quite an accomplishment. *Lion City* was made at a time when Malaysia and Singapore were one national entity – more or less – and moreover considered themselves as belonging to a single socio-cultural identity. There was no real border then between the two states. Although the movie's script had to do with the birth of Singapore, Malaysia formed part of the storyline, and several scenes were filmed there.

After the movie debuted, one Singaporean movie critic observed that Wong was coquettish throughout the movie. Was she playing her own Scarlett O'Hara even then? As it turned out, the movie was no *Gone With The Wind*, however, and never became a hit. When retrieved from the archives and shown to a Singaporean audience in 2008, it drew sniggers and laughs from the young audience. *Sic transit gloria*.

Yi Sui shot his next movie in 1962, this time entirely in Malaysia. Remarkably, he again took a chance on Wong as his main female star. Her sister, Wong Mee Meng also played a part in this movie under the stage name of Xia Ying (Summer Glow). *Black Gold* 黑金 had a larger budget than *Lion City* and a better story. It became a hit in Malaysia, and propelled



Opposite page, far left: Orchid Wong; bottom left: Wong in her teens; above: *Lion City* poster (1960); below: Wong in publicity photo in front of KL mosque, ca. 1960

Wong to star status among ethnic Chinese Malaysians. Like *Lion City*, *Black Gold* was also a love story, this time set in a Malaysian tin mining community of *dulang* washers (tin panners). When the movie was made in 1962, Malaysia was the world's largest producer of tin, and tin mining formed an inextricable part of the Chinese Malaysian psyche, as a large part of the Chinese populace had its Malaysian roots in the tough milieu of tin mining villages.

*Black Gold* had all the clichés found then in Asian-produced melodramas including the mandatory singing interludes, where here all the female *dulang* washers would break out in song. However, unlike *Lion City*, no reel of *Black Gold* has survived. It became a "lost movie." Needless to say, the movie has lapsed into near obscurity. Hard to believe then, that, for a while, the movie was a big part of the local buzz, and for one hectic moment of time in Kuala Lumpur, one movie – and one Malaysian beauty – attracted such big crowds and notoriety.



電影世紀 基本演員 胡姬 (『黑金』女主角)

Wong became Malaysia's first female Mandarin movie celebrity. But her "reign" was brief, and she never achieved even local star status on a par with Vivien Leigh; her struggles and inner demons, however, were all too common from the standpoint of one who rose so quickly to fame. Wong was rather petite and delicate, and her physical fragility was matched by a mental fragility. In time she became increasingly irascible, even as she built a wall around her. Her personal life mirrored the melodrama and turbulence of her movie roles. She lapsed into mental depression and alcoholism.

By the time she was making her third movie with Yi Sui, the border between reality and fantasy became increasingly blurred. Titled "Young Widow," the movie was inexplicably abandoned midway. There were rumors that Wong was difficult to work with, along with and rumors of budget problems.

Wong moved to Taiwan soon after the failure of "Young Widow," perhaps to seek a new start. She never made another movie. She married, and later the couple emigrated to San Francisco where they had their first and only child. In the 1970s she divorced, and lived thereafter a recluse. She died in San Francisco in 2007.

Tan Bee Thiam of the Asian Film Archive in Singapore has called for a region-wide search to retrieve the lost reels of *Black Gold* for posterity. *Lion City* was recently found and is now safely stored in the Asian Film Archive. What was a promising beginning for a young, beautiful and talented actress would prove to be her legacy.

A 1960 film magazine cover of Orchid Wong shows a radiantly beautiful and self-assured woman. And strangely, there is something in the face, and especially the eyes, that resembles Vivien Leigh's Scarlett O'Hara. Upon first meeting Vivien Leigh when she was being considered for the role, director George Cukor was suitably impressed by Leigh's looks, and her "incredible wildness." There is something of that same fire in the magazine cover picture of Orchid Wong. ■■



Above and below: two scenes from *Black Gold* with co-stars Xia Ying (female) and Zhang Ping; bottom: Wong on film magazine cover (1960)

