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THE 8 DIAGRAM POLE FIGHTER

五郎八卦棍 / Wǔláng Bāguà Gùn (Mandarin) / Ng⁵long⁴ Baat²gwaa³ Gwan³
(Cantonese) / The Invincible Pole Fighters (international English title)
Original release date: February 17th 1984 (Hong Kong)

CAST

Gordon Liu Yang Wu-lang (Fifth Brother)
Alexander Fu Sheng Yang Liu-lang (Sixth Brother)
Lily Li Dowager She
Wong Yue Yang I-lang (First Brother)
Lau Kar-wing Yang Erh-lang (Second Brother)
Kara Hui Yang Pa-mei (Eighth Sister)
Robert Mak Yang San-lang (Third Brother)
Hsiao Hou Yang Ssu-lang (Fourth Brother)
Cheung Chin-pang Yang Chi-lang (Seventh Brother)
Yeung Ching-Ching Yang Jiu-mei (Ninth Sister)
Lau Kar-leung Hunter
Wang Lung-wei Yeh Lu-lien
Phillip Ko Abbot of Ching Liang Temple
Chu Tiet-wo Kuan Kuei
Lam Hak-ming Pan Mei
Lee King-chu Priest Chih Hung
Yeung Sai-gwan Khitan General
Sek Gong Khitan General
Wang Ching-ho Innkeeper

CREW

Directed by **Lau Kar-leung**
Produced by **Mona Fong, Lawrence Wong**
Written by **Ni Kuang, Lau Kar-leung**
Cinematography by **Tsao An-sung**
Edited by **Chiang Hsing-lung, Lee Yim-hoi**
Art Directors **Chan King-sam, Tang Kong-yin**
Music by **Su Chen-hou, Stephen Shing**
Martial Arts Directors **Lau Kar-leung, Lee King-chu, Hsiao Hou**





WOLVES AT THE DOOR

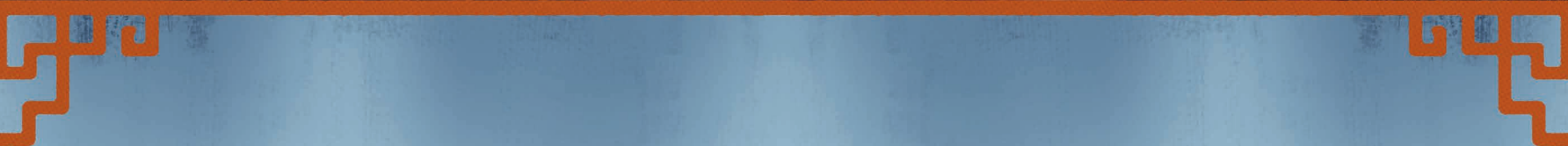
by Terrence J. Brady

Lau Kar-leung designed some of the most innovative and entertaining martial arts cinema during his tenure at Shaw Brothers. His ingenuity enabled him to combine real-life combative techniques with both comedic and dramatic touches. One production that stands out from the pack is a flawless piece of choreographic virtuosity, seeped with genuine anguish and remorse. That project, *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter* (1984), lost one of its primary stars during filming, and the aftershocks were not only felt by its cast and crew, but by the viewing audience, as the death of Alexander Fu Sheng resonated throughout its performance.

The storyline of *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter* is loosely based around historical folktales about the "Generals of the Yang Family". It is a compilation of plays and novels featuring a patriotic household from the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The Yangs have been immortalized for their military exploits for a millennium, yet they are a relatively unknown piece of Chinese history to Western spectators. A decade earlier, the Shaws introduced the Yangs to its film viewers with Cheng Kang's *The 14 Amazons* (*Shisi nu yinghao*, 1972) which depicted the Yang family protecting the Song borders from the invading Western Xia barbarians. Actress Lisa Lu Yan won Best Supporting Actress at the 11th Golden Horse Awards for her efforts and Cheng Kang took Best Director honors.

It was in this early 70s motion picture that the novice actor Cheung (better known as Alexander) Fu Sheng made his screen debut as a Xia soldier. It's rather serendipitous that he commenced his career with this movie, as Fu Sheng and lead actress Lily Ho Li-Li shared a common link. Ho's character was a grandchild of Yang Yanzhao, who was the 6th son of Yang Ye. Yang Yanzhao (aka Yang Sixth Brother) was the lone warrior to return home from the Chenjiagu battlefield, after the Yangs were betrayed by their countrymen, and later became the character that Fu Sheng eventually portrayed in *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter*, a role he would not complete due to his untimely demise.

Since his initial cameo role in 1972, Fu Sheng's rising star made him one of the studio's hottest commodities. Despite being one of Lau Kar-Leung's few private students, and working alongside him on numerous films with director Chang Cheh, he had yet to make a picture under his Sifu's guidance. When Lau finally had the opportunity to shoot his own projects at Shaw, he and his favored student had a falling out, and was forced to hand his



first leading role to Wong Yue in *The Spiritual Boxer* (*Shen da*, 1975). For the remainder of the decade, Lau continued to work with Wong, god-brother Gordon Liu Chia-Hui, Kara Hui Ying-Hung, and others. Alexander on the other hand, remained with Chang before branching out to work with directors Sun Chung and Chor Yuen.

Nevertheless, it was inevitable that these two mega stars of Movietown would pair up. One of the earliest mentions in the trades for *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter* was August 1980, during Fu Sheng's contract negotiations. After some months of deliberation, Sir Run Run Shaw approved a new three-year deal, but only after the actor agreed he'd complete two projects attached to his prior contract. The first was *My Rebellious Son* (*Xiao-zi you zhong*, 1982) which paused after Alex injured his right leg on the set of *Heroes Shed No Tears* (*Ying xiong wu lei*, 1980). The other assignment was Lau's *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter*. This latter



undertaking had gotten off to a rocky start with Fu Sheng's contract demands and his desire to direct, not to mention, co-star Gordon Liu's departure from Hong Kong to tend to personal affairs. One might surmise that these events were a foreshadowing of things to come for the troubled production.

What was to be the first of three Lau/Fu Sheng collaborations eventually took a backseat to *Legendary Weapons of China* (*Shiba ban wuyi*, 1982). Cameras rolled for that late Qing Dynasty project on January 24th, 1981, in which Alexander, who was still struggling with his mobility, optioned for a smaller comedic role. Three months later, on April 10th, 1981, shooting commenced on "The Heroic Family", which was the initial working title for *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter*. For many years, the fan induced rumor was this movie started much later (1982/83), but that was possibly due to its on/off/on again scheduling.

The production opened in the early Song Dynasty with a fog-enshrouded wilderness as the Yang Clan's patriarch and his seven sons are betrayed by a disloyal general. As each brother engaged the enemy, a single, uncut shot is matched to a similar shot for the next sibling, who carried on from the previous brother's forward movement. It is a subtle but sublime piece of choreography that set the bar for things to come.

In the ensuing battle the Yangs are overwhelmed by the Khitan warriors, and only the fifth and sixth sons manage to escape death. Sixth Brother (Fu Sheng) is driven insane by the carnage and Fifth Brother (Gordon Liu) is rescued by a fearless hunter, played by director Lau himself. This larger-than-life sequence of organized chaos was only the beginning and helped secure a Best Action Choreography nomination at the 4th Hong Kong Film Awards as Lau adopted the abstract presentation of Cantonese Opera over the traditional bloody massacre.

According to co-star Kara Hui, the director preferred to shoot action sequences first, and so the filming continued over the spring into the summer but paused. As with many productions on the Shaw lot, there were stoppages for a variety of reasons. A Shaw Brothers executive commented that the beginning and ending production dates were based on the remuneration days, and any hiatus periods weren't customarily factored in. Towards the end of the year, the day after Christmas 1981, Alexander, Gordon, and Lau commenced work on a new project; *Cat Vs. Rat* (*Yu maa saam heigam mousyu*, 1982). This venture also had its own set of issues. There was an ongoing feud between Alex and co-star Adam Cheng Siu-Chow which initiated a rift between actor and director. Another was Gordon's alleged injury during the shooting which put the production in suspension. *Cat Vs. Rat* finally wrapped up on September 6th, 1982, and studio space freed up for the continuation of the stalled *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter*.



In early 1983, Fu Sheng and his wife, singing sensation Jenny Tseng, were approaching the twilight of their marriage. This put further stress on the actor's workload but the plagued project forged ahead. Alexander was also working on two other films with director Wong Jing, *Hong Kong Playboys* (*Fa sam daai siu*, 1983) and *Wits of the Brats* (*Naamdau gun saamdau bak siuye*, 1984), which under normal circumstances wasn't an issue as the star juggled multiple assignments throughout his career. This time though, events were different. After moving out of his home and living apart from Jenny for some months, Alex and three others took in a warm July evening at the Clearwater Bay Country Club. Departing the exclusive club in his Porsche 911, and maneuvering the serpentine road, the sports car overcompensated a bend in the road and crashed. Alex and his elder brother were rushed to Kwun Tong United Christian Hospital, but in a few short hours, Fu Sheng was pronounced dead.

The resulting shockwave incapacitated Hong Kong as one of its most beloved performers was now gone. The Shaw Studio halted all productions as the staff prepared for the departed's funeral. Lau lamented, "After I heard the news of little Sheng's death, I was speechless and couldn't believe it true. How could the life of such a cute, energetic, and strong boy be so fragile? On the following day, I went back to Shaw and cancelled my schedule as my emotions were unstable. When I finally accepted the fact, I became despondent and lost."

For the remainder of the summer, the sets on both *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter* and Lau's third installment of the Chamber Trilogy, *Disciples of the 36th Chamber* (*Piklik sap git*, 1985), remained silent. Work gradually resumed at the studio as the dressing room of Movietown's favorite son transformed into a shrine. Lau's original script required substantial rewrites before returning in front of the camera. Two-thirds of the picture involved Fu Sheng as his character was intended to return to the battlefield to reclaim his father's weapon, persuade his brother to vacate the temple where he had taken refuge, and thus extract their revenge. The filmmaker's objective was to not just finish, but perfect the final product as soon as possible, so the audience could embrace the charisma of Alexander one last time.

The first week of September 1983 saw primary shooting resume on *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter* at Studio #10, as the cast and crew gathered around an incense table with offerings of chicken, roasted pork, cans of cola, and cigarette packs. They lit joss papers, hoping the departed's spirit would give blessings to the unfinished work. Gordon Liu found it a challenge to get back into routine when the project began anew, as Lee Tai-Hang took over aspects of the action and much of the crew had changed. There was also a troublesome rumor that the opening sequence was cursed, for it depicted the massacre of the male Yangs which they believed was an omen to Alex's untimely death.





Gordon stated that his grief was present throughout filming, and in some of the picture's emotive scenes, his tears were genuine as it provided him an outlet to cry. He had known Fu Sheng for nearly a decade in the industry, and said that despite his fame, Alex remained pure of heart which was his most admired trait. Gordon felt honor bound to complete this project for his fallen comrade, and produced some of the most electrifying sequences from his one-on-one pole fight with Phillip Ko Fei to the inconceivable, frenzied climax with Kara Hui.

In his revamped script, Lau gave all of Fu Sheng's remaining parts to Kara Hui. The gifted dancer turned martial artist instilled dynamism into these new sequences and delivered a noteworthy performance as Eighth Sister. Reported to be her favorite movie, she put all her conflicted feelings into the role as Hui battled her aggressors on the screen, as well as the misery in her own self. In fact, the emotional undercurrent of the fight sequences and the overall tone was representative of how many involved were feeling. Fu Sheng's

passing sullied the film's landscape which became riddled with pessimism, trauma, and rage. The semi-comic tone that Lau normally peppered his projects with was non-existent and the consequences of a real-world tragedy swept the characters up into an engulfing firestorm of madness.

For the casual viewer, *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter* is an action-packed whirlwind of bedlam and visual gratification. Striking and intricate sets, vibrant costumes and colorful characters, plus top-tier choreography and camerawork make this picture both enjoyable and exhilarating to its viewing audience. Hong Kong critics agree, as it's the director's only endeavor listed on the Hong Kong Film Archive's list of the Top 100 Chinese Films of all time. However, for those involved and the dedicated fan base, the multi-layered project holds a deeper sentiment. A volatile fusion of treachery, savagery, and retribution, it will be perpetually memorialized as the movie turned upside down as a result of the crushing death of Alexander Fu Sheng.

At a time when the studio was on the verge of extinction, the Shaw Brothers once again showed the world why it dominated the martial arts film industry. *The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter* is a commendation to the mastery of Lau Kar-leung and the miraculous cinema magic he created. It is a final hurrah for the remarkable talents of Shaw whose future was as bleak as the nightmarish opening battle sequence. Finally, it is a tribute to the last, great star of Movietown. As his character seemingly disappeared without explanation, the real-life Fu Sheng also left us too soon. However, like a Chinese folklore, his enduring spirit will persevere throughout the ages thanks to Master Lau and the Shaw Brothers Studio.

Terrence Brady is a graduate of the film program at Loyola University Chicago and has been writing freelance for 30 years. A Shaw Brothers aficionado since the late 70s, he is author of the book Alexander Fu Sheng: Biography of the Chinatown Kid.



武術大師劉家良激昂鉅獻

五郎八卦棍



劉家輝

領銜主演

邵氏院線盛大獻映

武術大師劉家良

龍威虎猛劉家輝 率領

劉家班 新春鉅獻

紀念影壇天之驕子
傅聲 特別演出

惠英紅
領銜主演



劉家良·劉家榮·汪禹·麥德羅·小侯·張展鵬·楊菁菁·元德 特別客串
李麗麗·王龍威·高飛·朱鐵和·克明·京柱 領銜主演

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with its original Cantonese, Mandarin and English mono mixes. Every effort has been made to present this film in its original and complete version using the best materials available.

The original 35mm picture negative was scanned in 2K resolution at L'Imagine Ritrovata Asia and restored at L'Imagine Ritrovata, Bologna. The film was graded at R3Store Studios, London. This new restoration has used the entire film negative without resorting to the practice of "frame-cutting" resulting in the loss of film frames at each negative splice point.

The mono mixes were remastered from the original sound negatives at L'Imagine Ritrovata. Additional sound remastering was completed by Matthew Jarman/Bad Princess Productions.

All original materials were made available from the Hong Kong Film Archive via Celestial Pictures. Restoration supervised by James White and James Flower, Arrow Films.

L'Imagine Ritrovata, Bologna: Gilles Barberis, Alessia Navantieri, Charlotte Oddo, Caterina Palpacelli, Davide Pozzi, Elena Tammaccaro

L'Imagine Ritrovata, Asia: Bede Chang, Kay Ng, Kathy Li

R3Store Studios: Dan Crussell, Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Rich Watson

Bad Princess Productions: Matthew Jarman

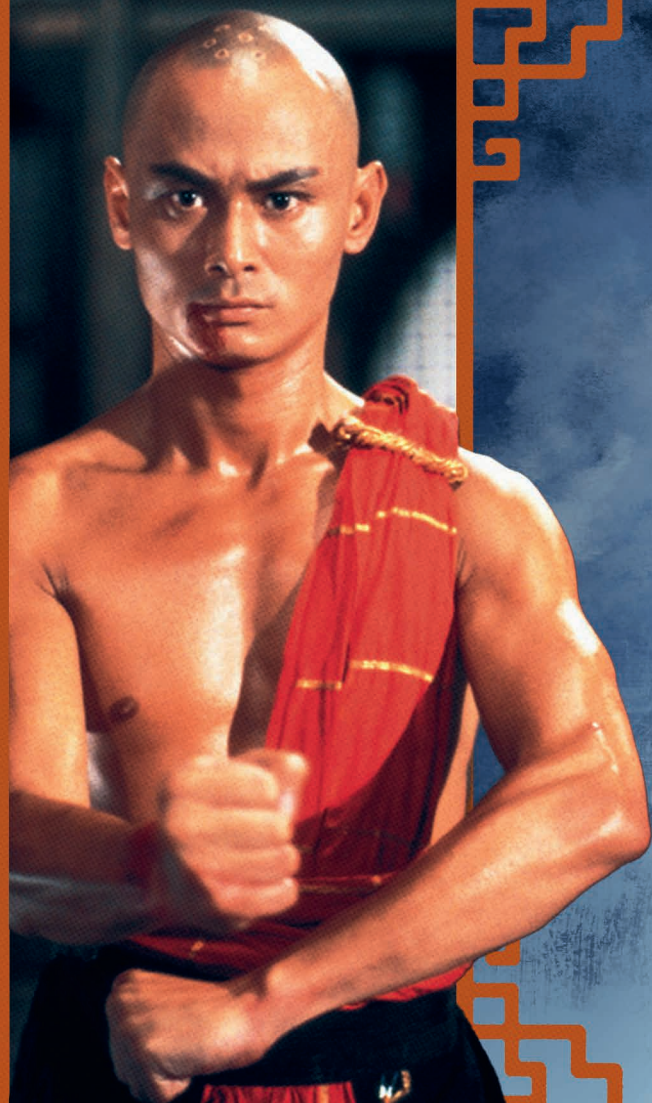
Celestial Pictures: Jolie Lo, Angela Fung, Gigi Ko, Apple Chiu, Elton Lee

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc & Booklet Produced by **James Flower**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert**, **Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
Disc Production Manager **Sigrid Larsen**
QC **Aidan Doyle**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Authoring **Leroy Moore**, **The Engine House Media Services**
Subtitling **Dylan Cheung** / **The Engine House Media Services**
Artwork **Marc Aspinall**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Frédéric Ambroisine, Terrence J. Brady, Dylan Cheung,
King-Wei Chu, Jonathan Clements, Angela Fung, Irongod2112, Elton Lee,
Jolie Lo, Tony Rayns, Jon Robertson



導演

劉家良

激昂鉅獻

紀念影壇天之驕子

傅聲

特別演出



AV339 / AV457