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白銀帝國

EMPIRE OF SILVER



A
CHRISTINA YAO
FILM

Starring

AARON KWOK

TIE LIN ZHANG

HAO LEI

Also starring

JENNIFER TILLY DING ZHI CHENG LEI ZHEN YU

WRITTEN BY CHRISTINA YAO CHENG YI BASED ON THE BOOK BY CHENG YI LINE PRODUCER LI CONGXI PRODUCTION DESIGNER YEE CHUNG MAN CINEMATOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY YIU MING PUN (H.K.S.C.)

MUSIC COMPOSED BY SU CONG SEIKOU NAGAOKA LIN HAI SOUND DESIGNER TAO JING
ACTION CHOREOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN TUNG WAI FILM EDITING BY HUMPHREY DIXON LIAO CHING SONG TANG HUA
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER ZHANG ZHEN YAN PRODUCED BY CHIAO HSIUNG PING CHRISTINA YAO EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JEREMY THOMAS DIRECTED BY CHRISTINA YAO

CO-PRODUCED BY **CRYSTAL CLEAR PICTURES & POLYBONA FILMS**
SALES COMPANY **HANWAY FILMS**

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SYNOPSIS

China, 1899. A hedonistic young man must assume the role of heir to a banking empire he cares little about. Following the tragic kidnapping of his brother's wife, "Third Master" reluctantly submits to pressure from his overbearing father.

Powerful bank-owner Lord Kang is determined to prepare Third Master for financial leadership by molding his son into his own image. The ruthless businessman tries to convince his son to choose a proven unscrupulous bank manager over a more honest one. But the idealistic Third Master has always questioned his father's autocratic rule and ethics.

The tense relationship is further complicated by Third Master's undying love for his beautiful young stepmother, his first and only love stolen from him by his own father.

Embarking on a metaphysical journey, Third Master must decide whether to follow his father's path or find his own. Greed, deception and jealousy surface under the pressures of war and the impending change from silver to paper bills ...



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Inspired by historical events, EMPIRE OF SILVER features a “piaohao,” Chinese precursor to the modern-day bank. Like the group of merchants in EMPIRE OF SILVER, piaohao controlled the whole nation’s finances, concurrently monopolizing the money transfer business (the equivalent of wiring funds today) and managing funds on loan and deposit. In EMPIRE OF SILVER, the fictitious group is representative of the piaohao of the time, with its numerous branches all over China and also in nearby countries such as Russia, Mongolia and Japan.

China’s Shanxi province is an area that was dubbed “the Wall Street of China” by Sterling Seagrave in his book *The Soong Dynasty*. Shanxi merchants were known for their erudition and efficient business system which enabled them to financially challenge the imperial courts of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Piaohao controlled the financial world of China like Wall Street has controlled the US financial system. As lending institutions, piaohaos’ mainstay was money transfer. They were the inventors of a wiring (for lack of a better description, this was done by bank checks) system that was secured by secret codes, which enabled the businesses and governments to do transactions without shipping huge amounts of silver.

Profit sharing was also invented by the Shanxi merchants. Unique at the time, investors and staff owned shares of their joint business at the onset. This guaranteed continuity in management and in staff loyalty. Staff strived to reach profit-sharing status, similar to today’s junior lawyers seeking to become partner in a law firm.

All piaohao operated on CEO systems. The investors were not to interfere with the operations and businesses of the banks. They and their families were not allowed on the premises of the banks. This guaranteed professionalism inside the system and avoided nepotism inherent in family businesses.





COMMENTS FROM DIRECTOR-PRODUCER CHRISTINA YAO

THE SHANXI MERCHANTS



The story of the Shanxi province merchants has been buried for a century or more. This piece of history was nearly forgotten partly due to the modesty, partly to the secrecy, of the merchants. In the social structure of China's imperial times, the merchant class was considered the lowest of the four social classes: scholar class, farmer class, technician class (carpenter, artisan, etc), and merchant class. The merchants were oppressed precisely because they tended to be wealthy and thereby powerful. In some dynasties, the dress code of merchants forbade them to wear silk for fear that they exhibit their wealth and thereby their ability to influence. Under such repression, the Shanxi merchants were able to steer away from the surveillance of the court to accumulate great wealth that rivalled the nation's treasury. They basically formed a parallel empire that cooperated with the court, sometimes even challenged the court, yet without disastrous results. This itself is in a great part due to their staying out of the

limelight: one of their principles was "to keep everything hidden". As a result, they left hardly any trace of their system and their work. It was only through a few books written by disgruntled managers, and the records in the magistrates and treasury that their stories were able to be reconstructed in recent years.

LIKE WALL STREET TODAY

My family came from the Shanxi province, though I was born in Taiwan. Only by coincidence I learnt about the Shanxi business group's ethics and systems, as well as the historical circumstances that created their financial dynasties which ran parallel to, and had tense yet corporative relationships with the Ming and the Qing courts. Like Wall Street today, the Shanxi merchants worked in intimate ways with the central government. Besides lending to businesses, Piao Hao lent heavily to the Qing government. They financed the civil war that the Qing court engaged with the Taiping Rebels. They also often financed local governments' taxes to the central government and earned big interests from the local government.



When I started working on this project, the Enron fraud scandal was still big news. I realized how much EMPIRE OF SILVER could be a story of business ethics. So I tried to make this my voice for the film. At that time, I didn't realize how this would become even more relevant today. In EMPIRE OF SILVER, the character of Third Master has a line: "Doing business is no more than conducting oneself." One century after the film's setting, after two world wars, many regional wars, the digital revolution, etc., the world's problem still boils down to one question: how should a man conduct himself among fellow men? A very Confucian question.

CONFUCIAN VALUES

The Shanxi merchants' financial institutions or "piaohao" cultivated their staff members from a young age. Boys 12 or 13, through recommendation and examination, were brought into the training programs as apprentices. They would continue their education in classical Confucian canon, in addition they would be given math and foreign language training (Japanese, Mogolian). The Confucian traditional values and a sense of fairness seem to underline all the behavioral codes required upon the Shanxi merchants. They actually considered themselves, and were considered by others, as "Confucian" merchants. This title carried with itself high standards for morality and behavior. Because of the importance they placed on integrity, there were codes of behavior, especially sexual behavior, by which all merchants had to abide. Piaohao managers could not divorce, nor have a concubine nor visit brothels. From their assigned posts, they were allowed to go home to visit their wives and families only every three years for a six-month vacation. The solitary, monkish lifestyle facilitated the high performances of the managers.



THIRD MASTER

Western audiences might be surprised by how the leading character is called: “Third Master.” This is the nickname system used by pre-modern Chinese families. The first son is called First, second is called Second, by the parents. And if the family is well-off, people of lower social status would refer to the male members as “master.” This became a custom because Chinese families used to have many children. Today, however, the number-as-nickname system is no longer in practice.



A FILM ABOUT SUCCESSION



When I started this project, I knew I had to extract a main plotline from the massive three-volume romance of the original Cheng-yi book, “The Silver Valley.” I thought: King Lear, Hamlet and The Godfather were all family stories with succession as the core of the storyline. I always felt that I had in my hands the family story of a powerful clan, so I focused on succession as the film’s central plot.

Third Master struggles between his public duty and his private wants. He feels doubly betrayed by his father: His father married Third master’s first love, and his father has shady dealings underneath the posture of a righteous businessman. However, being the only heir possible to assume family duty, and being a Confucian man, Third Master cannot extract himself from his family. He must take on the job of being the family head. But Third Master is a rebel, and he expresses his

rebellion, and his loyalty to his lost love. He unmercifully rejects his father’s plea for him to produce an heir with his opium-addicted wife. I was very aware I had to make the value of dynastic succession evident to the audience. I also wanted to use this financial empire to mirror the rules of the dynastic period of China.

CONFUCIANISM VS. LEGALISM

The chief conflict between the two generations of the Kangs, Third Master and his father Lord Kang, is over a woman, but also their different ideological beliefs. The forces produced by two thought systems - Confucianism vs. Legalism - were the key source of court intrigue during the dynastic period of China. Generations of scholars schooled in Confucian canon had to subject themselves to the autocracy of their emperors and try to resolve the conflict between their conscience and their sense of duty and their needs to survive and prosper in court. Although operating under the guise of Confucianism, in reality all the Chinese emperors were autocrats practicing the skills of control invented and practiced by the Legalist ideology (Sun Tzu’s “Art of War” is a reference). Chairman Mao can be considered the most recent legalist ruler.

WHETHER A WOMAN’S BODY BELONGS TO HERSELF

Since I decided to focus on succession, a woman’s capacity to bear children naturally becomes central to the plot. And the debate about whether a woman’s body belongs to herself or to the families that she is born into or married into is carried out in between Lord Kang and his young wife in physically violent terms. I wrote this in because I wanted Madame Kang to be a strong life-embracer. I wanted her to be someone who has a belief that she adheres to, rather than a victim that reacts to the environment she is put in. She takes out her own reproductive organs so that she doesn’t trap herself further by becoming the mother of children whose father she detests. She loves Third Master and she makes sacrifices for him, but when she realizes her love for him is going to destroy herself, she is also capable of leaving. She is someone that knows what she wants and goes the distance for what she wants. She controls her own fate and she belongs to herself.





MAKING CHOICES IN LIFE

In Third Master's room I hung a calligraphy piece stating the Ming Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming's teaching: "To Access Your Innate Moral Knowledge." EMPIRE OF SILVER is about Third Master's making choices in life. Third Master is a man constantly asking himself what is right and what is wrong. His conscience makes him a prisoner to his own sense of moral obligation. He is a moral hero because he makes choices for the good of others, sacrificing what is dear to himself however keeping his conscience clear and his integrity intact.

Third Master is a man of empathy. The most evident example of this is his decision to use his family savings to pay back his depositors' loss during the transition between the Qing Dynasty and the Republic. This decision forms a sharp contrast with his father's profiteering through hoarding salt and selling it at the point that salt deficiency is already killing the poor. The ideological difference between father and son is translated into games of blood: the minds of the powerful decide life and death of the poor.



FATHER VS. SON: DIFFERENT STYLES OF RULING

Confucianism and Legalism are both philosophies of ruling. Confucianism is about acting with humanity and kindness, while Legalism is about exerting control. The contrasting behavioral patterns of father and son in EMPIRE OF SILVER are meant to highlight the differences between the two ideologies, and the different results they bring. The ideological differences between father and son heat up when Third Master must, as his biggest responsibility as heir, choose a CEO for the family piahao.

In EMPIRE OF SILVER, controlling Lord Kang tries to make the CEO choice for his son, preaching to him on "the art of controlling men". He cites Legalist text about three means

for controlling staff: rewards in terms of title and money, and instilling fear. Lord Kang exemplifies this art of enforcing fear on staff. He dismisses Manager Qiu at the beginning of the film in a ploy to make him feel indebted and thereby wholly controllable. Third Master's displeasure with Manager Qiu derives precisely from the relationship his father established for the two of them: a master-slave relationship based on fear. Lord Kang, like all imperial rulers, firmly believes in the Legalist thought system that focuses on psychological manipulation. Third Master, however, is a Confucian man who aspires to follow his own conscience and searches for like-virtues in his fellow men. Third Master finds a kindred spirit in Manager Dai whose impeccable professionalism and behavior intimidates Lord Kang. Based on their like-mindedness, Third Master chooses Dai as the CEO of his era. Theirs is a relationship based on mutual respect and equal partnership.

THE SHOOT

The shoot lasted four and half months, from September 2006 to Jan 31, 2007, and finished on schedule. We shot completely on location. We moved nine times, shot the film in four provinces (Gan Su, Qing Hai, Shanxi, Hebei, all in the west, northwest and north of China), all together 13 counties and cities, on 40-some sets. All the buildings used in EMPIRE OF SILVER were real buildings that survived disasters and time. They are all considered museums now. The 500-year-old Ming building used in the abacus scene is one of the two surviving buildings in China that has gold flakes in the surface paint. The bridge on which the salt-deficient poor lay is a Yuan dynasty bridge and is at least 700 years old. The big Kang family compound was shot in three such complexes still existing in Shanxi. The large Western-style bridge is in Tianjin. Computer graphics work had to be used throughout the film to erase modernity from the actual locations.





COSTUMES AND PROPS

The men's costumes were made for the film, but the decorative details, such as jade pendants, jade pieces on hats, rings and buttons were all authentic antiques. The women's costumes, especially those of Madame Kang's, were pieced together with antique pieces and new materials. The women's headdresses were also antique pieces, some were too faded and had to be re-plated with gold.

Some hand props were reproductions based on historical references: tea cups, brushes, and the big abacuses (made on scale based on the museum's collection). But almost all the set decorations, porcelain and furniture were authentic antiques. Everything had to be carefully guarded on the set 24 hours a day because of their extreme value.

I was very aware of the trust given to me by the various museums and private collectors to include them in the movie because we all shared the desire to record on film what Chinese dynastic life was really like. I studied the colors of the porcelain pieces, the wood of the furniture. They all exemplified a quality and technology that we no longer possess. Working with these precious artifacts was a very moving experience for me.



MUSIC

There are six basic music themes in EMPIRE OF SILVER and the music was composed by three composers: Su Cong, Seikou Nagaoka, Lin Hai. Su Cong is the Oscar-winning composer of Bertolucci's THE LAST EMPEROR. Using the most traditional Chinese instruments among the three, Su Cong's pieces are used in the present-day love scenes of the adult lovers. We can say Su Cong did the theme of Madame Kang. Nagaoka handled the grand and philosophical themes: ancestral theme, business theme, and Third Master's own philosophical theme. Lin Hai took on the emotional themes of the family relationships and also the battle music. I listened to the styles of the composers, spotted the music in-and-out points and assigned different segments of the film to the composers by matching the emotional content of the scenes with their styles.

TURBULENT TIMES

At the end of the 19th Century and the early 20th Century, the setting of EMPIRE OF SILVER, China was going through a cultural civil war between its conservative factors and its Westernized factors. The Boxer Rebellion, the Allied invasion and the Nationalist Revolution were all part of the process. Bankers, who need a stable society to conduct business, became the road kill on the grand highway leading to the great changes.

Well-traveled and schooled, the Shanxi merchants were quite Westernized, even trendy. I included the West in the story in order to show the bankers as cosmopolitan in their attitudes and lifestyle. Historically, the Nationalist Revolution was also Western influenced. The Boxer Rebellion was, on the other hand, like the fundamentalist movements in many parts of

the world today, anti-intellectual as well as anti-West. The outcome of the chaos and the Allied Forces' invasion had a direct destructive impact on the bankers. After the Republic was established, the new era brought further changes in the monetary system. Piaohao became shadows of themselves. Some converted to actual banks, some closed. But they never regained the glory they had during the 100 years of financial dominance in the Qing dynasty.







AARON KWOK (as Third Master)

Hong Kong superstar Aaron Kwok has earned a huge following of fans and acclaim for his films, TV and commercials as an actor, and for his music and stage performances as a singer.

Kwok is a rare consecutive two-time Best Actor winner at Taiwan's coveted Golden Horse Awards. In 2005, Kwok won for his moving performance in Benny Chan's *DIVERGENCE*. He won Best Actor again in 2006 for his role in Patrick Tam's *AFTER THIS OUR EXILE*. Kwok's other film credits include: Oxide Pang Chun's *THE DETECTIVE*, Stanley Tong's *CHINA STRIKE FORCE*, Johnnie To's *THROW DOWN* and *THE BARE-FOOTED KID*, Dante Lam's *AMBUSH*, Wai-keung Lau's *THE STORM RIDERS*, Jing Wong's *SUPER SCHOOL OVERLORD*, Gordon Chan's *2000 AD* and Chung Man Yee's *AND I HATE YOU SO*.

Kwok's popularity came to the foreground in the 1990s with extremely popular films, TV series, commercials and albums. The Asian media refers to Kwok as one of the "Four Heavenly Kings," along with Jacky Cheung, Andy Lau and Leon Lai. He has also been dubbed "Hong Kong's Michael Jackson" for his concert performances.

TIELIN ZHANG (as Lord Kang)

Belonging to the famed FIFTH GENERATION artist group, Tielin Zhang went through hardship during the Cultural Revolution and became one of the first group of students accepted by the reopened Beijing Film Academy along with Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Tielin's early film credits include leading roles in Han Hsiang Li's *THE BURNING OF YUAN MING YUAN*, *THE QUEEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS*, Hark Tsui's films *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA* and *THE MAGIC CRANE*, and Chen Bai's *UNDER THE BRIDGE*.

At the height of his early career as a film actor, Tielin left China and went to study Directing at the British National Film and Television School. He received his MA degree in Directing in 1990.

From 1985 to 1995 Tielin worked as a producer and presenter at BBC in London and Star TV in Hong Kong. Tielin Zhang has directed several short and medium-length films, including 1990's *MAN FROM CHINA*, the documentary *PEOPLE AND CULTURE OF JAPAN*, and the BBC documentary, *THE TRILOGY OF CHINA*. Tielin also wrote the screenplays for *ANY MOMENT CAN BE A TURNING POINT*, *SUN TZU* and *THE CHAIR*, a feature film which he directed himself. His scripts *ANY MOMENT CAN BE A TURNING POINT* and *THE CHAIR* won Best Screenplay praise from the Information Bureau of Taiwan.

After returning to China in 1996 Tielin became a cultural icon through the rich combination of his colorful lives. He is a famed art collector and calligrapher. He has had leading roles in film and TV series such as "Princess Pearl", "Lu Bu Wei: Hero in Times of Disorder", "The Bronze Teeth", and "Aroma in Autumn". He has become one of the most popular stars in the Chinese-speaking world for his portrayals of emperors of the Qing Dynasty.

While one of the busiest actors currently in China, Tielin still manages to perform his duties as dean of the Arts College of Jinan University.



HAO LEI (as Madam Kang)

Hao Lei is one of the brightest actresses of the new generation. Her eye-catching performances have been seen in over 20 TV series and films. An accomplished actress, Hao Lei has been acclaimed for the diversity of her challenging roles. Hao Lei recently starred in Ye Lou's *SUMMER PALACE*, which premiered at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. Her impressive roles in TV series like "Misty Love in Palace" and "The Young Prince of Han" have gained much popularity for Hao Lei.



JENNIFER TILLY (as Mrs. Landdeck)

Jennifer Tilly's unique voice and persona have made her well-known to filmgoers everywhere. Jennifer earned an Academy Award nomination for her portrayal of the aspiring but hopelessly untalented actress Olive Neal in Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994). She had a breakthrough role in *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (1989), and other acclaimed performances in the Jim Carrey hit *Liar Liar* (1997) and in Larry and Andy Wachowski's *Bound* (1996). Her film credits include Neil Jordan's *High Spirits* (1988), Oliver Stone's *The Doors* (1991), Richard Benjamin's *Made in America* (1993), Roger Donaldson's *The Getaway* (1994), Joe Pytko's *Let It Ride* (1989), P.J. Castellaneta's *Relax... It's Just Sex* (1998), Michael Radford's *Dancing at the Blue Iguana* (2000), Peter Bogdanovich's *The Cat's Meow* (2001) and Terry Gilliam's *Tideland* (2005).

Jennifer's pitch-perfect voiceover work brought deadly doll Tiffany to life in *Bride of Chucky* (1998) and *Seed of Chucky* (2004). She has also done vocal work for the films *Monsters, Inc.*, *Stuart Little*, and *Home on the Range*, as well as the children's series *Hey Arnold*. She is also a semi-regular cast member on the series "Family Guy," voicing the Griffin family's permanently pregnant neighbor, Bonnie Swanson. Her other TV work includes a recurring dramatic role on "Hill Street Blues", "Cheers", "Moonlighting", "It's Garry Shandling's Show" and "Frasier".

Jennifer is also an accomplished stage actress. She won a Theater World Award for her performance in off-Broadway's "One Shoe Off" and starred on Broadway in the 2001 revival of "The Women".

Daughter of a Chinese-American father, Jennifer was born in Los Angeles, but also spent part of her childhood in Canada.





Christina Yao

DIRECTOR & PRODUCER

Christina Yao makes her feature film directorial debut with the historical epic **EMPIRE OF SILVER**. She has an extensive theatrical repertoire, having directed over 30 plays for prestigious companies such as the American Conservatory Theatre and the National Theatre of Taiwan.

Published in Taiwan, France and the US, Yao is also an acclaimed short story writer, playwright and critical essayist. Yao's academic background has included Taipei's National Institute of the Arts, Wellesley College and San Francisco State University. Yao holds a Ph.D. in Asian Theatre from Stanford University.



FILMOGRAPHY

- 2009 **EMPIRE OF SILVER**
- 1997 **INTO THE SUBWAYS** (short)
- 1983 **A DAY OF ERIC** (short)





MAIN CAST

Third Master	AARON KWOK
Master Kang	TIELIN ZHANG
Madame Kang	HAO LEI
Mrs.Landdeck	JENNIFER TILLY
Manager Qiu	DING ZHI CHENG
Manager Dai	LEI ZHEN YU
Manager Liu	KING SHIH CHIEH
Manager Sun	HOU TONG JIANG
Yu Feng	TIEN NIU
Lu Sao	LU ZHONG
Lao Xia	SHI XIAO MAN
First Master	SHI DA SHENG
Bodyguard Chang You	WANG DE SHUN
Eunich	CHANG LAN TIAN
Pastor Landdeck	JONATHAN KOS-READ
Dr. Wilson	JOHN PAISLEY
Second Master	HEI ZI
Fourth Mistress	LI YI XIAO
Fourth Master	DU JIANG
Third Mistress	WANG SHUANG
Bandit Head	GUO TAO
San Xi	WU FANG
Third Master's Page	CHAI JIN

MAIN CREW

Director	CHRISTINA YAO
Executive Producer	JEREMY THOMAS
Producers	CHIAO HSIUNG PING & CHRISTINA YAO
Associate Producer	ZHANG ZHEN YAN
History advisors	BO XI CHENG, HUANG JIAN HUI & ZHANG ZHENG MING
Artistic advisor	WILLIAM CHANG SUK PING
Director of Cinematography	ANTHONY YIU MING PUN (H.K.S.C.)
Lighting Designer	WAI CHUEN WONG
Cinematography	CHAN KWOK HUNG
Production designer	YEE CHUNG MAN
Art Directors	CHANG CHI PINGH & CHRISTINA YAO
Costume Designers	YEE CHUNG MAN & JESSIE DAI MEI LING
Hair	POPEYE TAM
Make-up	MAN YUNG LING
Script Consultant	LI QIANG
Music Composed by	SU CONG, SEIKOU NAGAOKA & LIN HAI
Music Producers	SU CONG & NOBUHITO IKEHATA
Visual Effects Supervisors	NG YUEN FAI, BAKER LU, BOBBIE WONG & GARY BROWN
Editors	HUMPHREY DIXON, LIAO CHING SONG & TANG HUA
Action Choreography by	STEPHEN TUNG WAI
Sound designer	TAO JING
Production Sound Mixer	LIU JIA
Line Producer	LI CONG XI

Co-produced by Crystal Clear Pictures (Hong Kong) and Polybona Films (China)

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