

Patrick Tse is the Peter Pan of Asian cinema. He tells **Winnie Yeung** why he's not about to hang up those sunglasses anytime soon

A cad for all seasons

WITH SUCCESS in show business moving in ever diminishing cycles, Patrick Tse Yin stands out like a dodo in a zoo. In a world notorious for its intolerance of wrinkled skin and receding hairlines, Tse – who proudly and loudly declares himself a 70-year-old – remains a star to watch, almost 52 years after he propelled himself into cinemas as a boyish casanova.

What makes Tse an anomaly of his generation is how he gets to reprise that image of yore today. Rather than settling for parts as sick, weak grandfathers, Tse – better known here as Sei Gor (Cantonese for “fourth brother”), on account of his ranking among eight siblings – has been cast in roles that he's played for decades: the playboy. It was epitomised in his starring role in the ATV drama series *Central Affairs* last year, when he played a tycoon who sleeps with women young enough to be his daughters, if not granddaughters.

One might not expect a septuagenarian to pull it off, but a short walk with Tse along Queen's Road Central provides a testament to why it all clicks. The moment he saunters out of Café des Artistes, heads turn and eyes fix on the 180cm figure in a white, bespoke suit with a Gianfranco Ferré handkerchief ostentatiously stuffed in the pocket. A black shirt lies underneath, unbuttoned to the waist, revealing a muscular abdomen that would prompt men half his age to suck in their beer bellies, while his long hair is slicked back in a ponytail. And finally, there's his trademark black sunglasses, which he famously wears everywhere, day or night.

True to style, Tse is unabashed about being the envy of younger men. “I can keep my youth, my body and people still come to me with roles that are younger than my age – *lei chui meh*,” he says. The send-off line is a slightly vulgar Cantonese phrase which could be translated as, “So what can you do about it?” – one of many cocky profanities that pepper Tse's banter.

Since his first film, 1954's *Save Your Water Supply*, Tse has been the pin-up boy of local film, wooing thousands of fans with his handsome looks and (apparent) sophisticated manner – no matter if the role is an ex-convict or a rich radio host.

And his off-screen life is as colourful as the hundreds of films in which he's starred. He's never been short of girlfriends: the long list starts in the 1950s with working partner Patsy Kar Ling, who was the reigning queen of local film. The pair, who appeared in more than 30 films together, embodied the hip, westernised lifestyle that typified a city on the rise. Then it was Josephine Siao Fong-fong, his next partner on and off screen in the 60s. After that, the rumour mill ran hot, linking him to a welter of young starlets. “It's just

an illusion – do you think it's an advantage to work with pretty actresses?” he says.

He was married twice: first to actress Chen Chen, and then Deborah Li, with whom he has two children. Nicholas Tse Ting-fung and younger daughter Jennifer Tse Ting-ting are now just as famous as their father, their every trial and tribulation caught on camera and plastered across the tabloids.

The list might be long, but none of the relationships worked: (“They went on to marry good husbands – maybe I brought them good luck.”) Right now he's seeing a woman from Shanghai, who, at 24, is as old as his daughter. “I can still get a girlfriend that young, *lei chui meh?*” he says.

Tse dresses impeccably every time he steps out the door – a habit he's adhered to since becoming an actor. And sharp dressing means a fortune spent on clothes and accessories. “That's why I have to keep as fit physically as I was at least a decade ago, or else my clothes won't fit me,” he says.

Although Tse keeps fit mentally and physically – and can bare his chest with the best of the young actors – the signs of ageing will eventually show on his face. “I will admit this – I've asked a plastic surgeon about surgery,” he says. “If one day I really need to do it, I would. I guess, in 10 years' time.”

The audacious front he puts up makes him a target for the more merciless show business writers. He is lambasted for his habit of wearing sunglasses – even in the sex scene in *Central Affairs*, in which he kept his shades on while cavorting in bed with his then 35-year-old onscreen partner Pinky Cheung Man-chi.

“I've worn sunglasses in public ever



Made in the shades: Veteran actor Patrick Tse (top) has cultivated his playboy image over the years, and the bedroom scene with onscreen partner Pinky Cheung (above) in last year's first season of *Central Affairs* only added to the reputation. Photo: Ricky Chung



since I was young because it's part of my image,” he says. “OK, that time [in bed with sunglasses] might have been a bit much – but didn't you think it was cool? I'm sure I'm the first.”

In fact, he doesn't seem to mind showing the ravages of age around his eyes during the interview. He has also been filmed without the eyewear in a rare scene in *Central Affairs*, in which his character – a tycoon obsessed with power, money and women – appears as a helpless wreck bound to his wheelchair. “That was neces-

sary because it was about my character being miserable and ill,” he says.

The noise the scene with sunglasses raised translated into soaring ratings, an ATV spokeswoman says. And maybe it is this unusual attraction that prompted the channel to bring back Tse for the second season of *Central Affairs*, which is now screening on ATV Home. But his role this time is not a rich man, but a decent taxi driver who falls for an old flame (one who isn't half his age this time).

He says he can't refuse work because he has to keep busy. “Several years ago I thought about killing myself,” he says. “I wasn't doing much acting and I was living a comfortable life. And I thought if there is nothing going on and my life becomes kind of dull, then I should just end it.”

He doesn't mind taking smaller parts in order to keep busy – he guest-starred in Stephen Chow Sing-chi's *Shaolin Soccer* as the evil leader of a football team in 2001 and his role in *Central Affairs* is scene-stealing but hardly pivotal.

“As long as it's a role that I can have fun playing and it makes some noise, then I don't see why not,” he says.

He has the knack of leaping over generational gaps. At a recent shoot on location in Tai Po, Tse was seen riding his Harley-Davidson motorcycle with Cheung, and spent most of his time cracking jokes with members of the crew as they waited in the heat for a notoriously unpunctual co-star to arrive.

“I have no problems working with younger people as they find me as much

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fun as anyone their own age,” he says. And his friendliness towards co-workers helps too. “I've never achieved anything in my career, but I think the one thing I earn – which is most valuable – is friendship,” he says. “This job helps me make good friends from all walks of life – from the bright to the dark side of society. So whenever I'm in trouble, someone will help.”

A friendly demeanour is far from the norm in showbiz these days, especially in view of the reported off-screen cat-fights on the set of *Central Affairs* which have been occupying the Chinese press for months. Former Miss Chinese International, Michelle Ye Xuan, has been painted as the culprit in this case following rumours of feuds with female co-stars and Ye allegedly stabbing herself in the lap to get attention.

Having a youthful outlook might also be the reason his 24-year-old girlfriend doesn't mind the age difference. In fact, he claims to be the one concerned by the gap. “If my daughter had a boyfriend in his 70s, I would certainly say no,” he says. “I don't care what others say about me, but I'm worried about my girlfriend getting pressure from her friends and family. So, no, I haven't met her family yet.”

“But as long as we're happy together then it's fine. She is really something – she is not the kind of young girl who tries to be with stars or anything.”

Living a carefree life (“I even like to play more than Nicholas does,” he quips) and having a young girlfriend, Tse says he now enjoys the lifestyle that he always wanted – spending every cent that he makes on his own enjoyment. “I might be the first actor who's lived in only one apartment, but had seven cars,” he says.

“I used to have a family, but now my kids have grown up and my wives have remarried. I basically have no burden. So why not spend money on stuff that I like and invest in my wardrobe?”

His free-spending ways have prompted many to question his finances and he is constantly denying allegations that Nicholas' earnings for Emperor Entertainment Group are keeping him afloat.

He does admit taking a “total loss” in a garment manufacturing business many years ago. But he's not shy to admit that he has no savings and supports himself with money he earns from investments in friends' businesses.

“I'm only worried about one thing – I pray that I won't end up miserable in my last few years alive ... holding a bowl to beg on the street.”

“But, no, I would have killed myself before that. Hahaha.”

Central Affairs (Season 2), airs Mon-Fri at 9.25pm on ATV Home

Students and teachers learn a valuable lesson from Bollywood

Even as Indian films tried to make a splash abroad with an offering of 65 films in this year's Cannes Film Market, they have been making waves of a different kind at home. Bollywood, which has been ruling the hearts and minds of Indians like a powerful religion, is now entering ordinary schools and colleges all over the country.

People associate Bollywood with colourful, formulaic song-and-dance melodramas. Even though a few exceptions in the form of songless thrillers (*Ek Haseena Thi; Ab Tak Chhappan; Darna Zaroori Hai; Being Cyrus*) have been thrown in lately, the fact remains that Bollywood has not been taken seriously, not even in India. It has always been treated as the producer of fairy tale fantasies, as an opiate for the masses. This is despite Bollywood being the world's biggest film-producing centre, churning out as many as 800 films a year, netting revenues of an estimated US\$1.25 billion according to 2004 figures by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

But things are slowly changing. In April this year, India's

postcard

Bollywood

Zafar Anjum

Central Board of Secondary Education, a premier educational body, announced the inclusion of *Sholay* (*Embers*, 1975), one of India's most-loved blockbusters, into an Oxford University Press course workbook for Class V students.

This is a historic development both for the schools and the Indian film industry. With its inclusion in textbooks, *Sholay* becomes India's first film to be taught in the country's schools.

Sholay has many distinctions to its credit, the latest being the academic one. It is the vaudeville story of two outlaws (played by Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra) hired by an honest police officer to nab a dreaded robber, Gabbar Singh (Amjad Khan). *Sholay* has been loved by generations of Indians, and it

enjoys the distinction of being India's first “biryani western”. It is the highest-grossing Indian film of all time, bringing in US\$50 million at the box office.

The question is: why did *Sholay* get this honour over thousands of Hindi films made in the past 100 years? Recognising cinema as an integral part of Indian culture, the authorities have reasoned that the inclusion of this film in the curriculum will make children aware of the prominence attached to the Indian film industry and of the multicultural ethos of Indian society.

Disagreement with this line of argument is difficult as *Sholay* has proved its mettle on both these counts.

This innovative use of Bollywood films does not extend to schoolchildren alone. About 50,000 school teachers in Delhi are also set to get a powerful dose of Hindi cinema. Two recent blockbusters, *Munnabhai MBBS* (2003) and *Rang De Basanti* (2006), are going to be used for teachers' training in the capital. Set against the backdrop of India's

contemporary education system, both films have resonated with audiences. While *Munnabhai MBBS* is about a gangster trying to earn a medical degree to impress his father (also being remade in Hollywood by filmmaker Mira Nair as *Gangsta MD*), *Rang De Basanti* is a clarion call for today's youth to rise up and make India free of corruption.

Interestingly, Bollywood was also found to be useful in business schools and the seminar circuits in India. In 2002, two maverick Indian economists, Bibek Debroy and Amir Ullah Khan, made a documentary, *India's Economic Transition Through Bollywood Eyes*. Their work showed India's milestones in its political economy and legislation through film clips gleaned from scores of Indian films released in the past 50 years. The film was shown to economics and management school students across the nation, evoking a positive response from students and the media. Students were amused to see how cinema, basically a medium of entertainment, could be used to



Amitabh Bachchan (left) and Dharmendra in *Sholay*

teach a cut-and-dried subject such as economics.

One year later, the duo took the same approach to highlight the travails of marginal farmers in India through another documentary – *Village Vignettes* (subtitled *Agriculture and the Small Farmers in India – A Bollywood Perspective*). The documentary was distributed in

the form of compact discs by a Delhi-based non-profit organisation, International Development Enterprises.

In 1996, while taking a break from writing his dissertation at New York's Cornell University, Brij Kothari hit upon the idea of leveraging on Bollywood's educational value outside the classroom. Now, he is using the

“Same-Language-Subtitles” (SLS) technology to spread literacy in India, with the help of an unconventional ally: Google. The idea that Bollywood films could really help in the spread of literacy convinced the American company to fund Kothari's unique venture in India, Planet Read. Active in Mumbai and Pondicherry, Planet Read uses the SLS methodology that provides “automatic reading practice to individuals who are excluded from the traditional educational system, or whose literacy needs are otherwise not being met”. Kothari's potential targets are the 40 per cent of the 500 million Indians who have access to television but are poor and have low literacy skills.

He claims that through Planet Read's approach, more than 200 million early-literates in India are getting weekly reading practice. It's a low-cost intervention that saw 10,000 people getting their regular reading exercises for just US\$1.

For once, Bollywood may rightly feel proud of its legacy and its usefulness to Indian society.