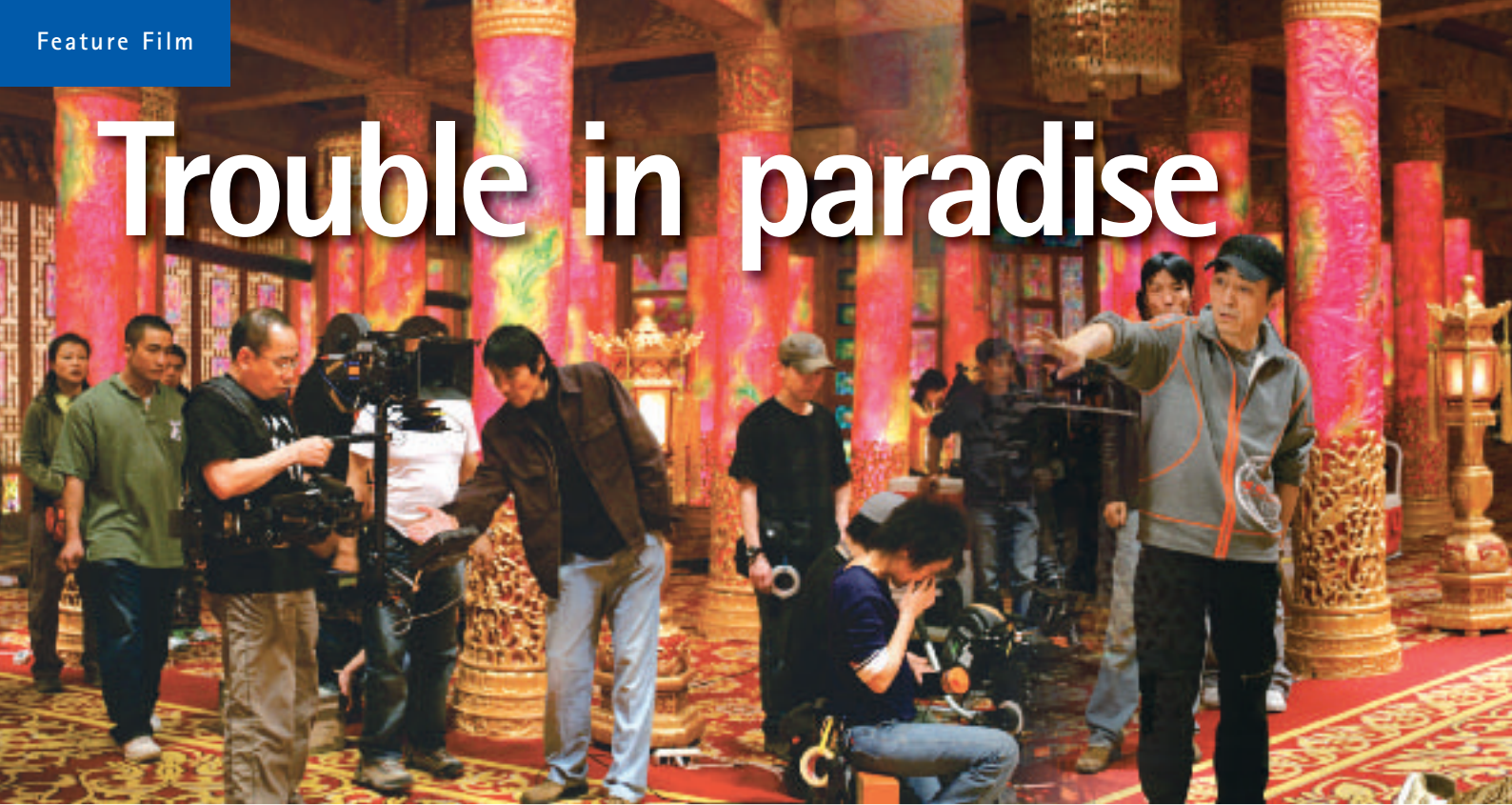


# Trouble in paradise



**Above left:**  
Cinematographer Zhao Xiao Ding checks a shot with Steadicam operator Raymond Lam

**Above right:**  
Director Zhang Yi-Mou working with actor Chow Yun Fat

**C**urse Of The Golden Flower is the latest epic period film by director Zhang Yimou. Cinematographer Zhao Xiao Ding, is a graduate of Beijing Film Academy and was Yimou's collaborator on *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* (Oscar-nominated for Best Cinematography in 2004). With a script loosely based on the well known 1934 Chinese stage play *Thunder and Rain* by Cao Yu, *The Curse of the Golden Flower* relocates the story to an imperial family living just before the Tang Dynasty, a time known for its lavish visual beauty. The Imperial Palace is the main setting for the King's struggle to maintain the balance of power between the King (Chow Yun Fat) and the Queen (Gong Li), and his three sons. Betrayal, deceit and passion pit King against Queen, and father against son.

As befits a wuxia film, *The Curse of the Golden Flower* is resplendent with elaborate swordplay, flying fighters and vast battle scenes. In this genre, an elegant, dynamic and fluid style of camera movement is essential. To capture the complexities of the action sequences, one of which takes place in a deep valley and features flying attackers ambushing galloping horsemen, Xiao Ding introduced several new pieces of equipment to Chinese filmmaking. The Flying-Cam®, a remote aerial photography system using a stabilization mount on an unmanned helicopter was used to capture sweeping dramatic shots over the horsemen. He also employed a MovieBird® telescopic crane and a MK-V AR Steadicam system to provide visual excitement to every shot.

A Hong Kong and Chinese co-production between Edko Film Hong Kong and Beijing New Picture Film Company, *The Curse of the Golden Flower* is budgeted at US\$45 million, making it the biggest budget Chinese production to date.

"Zhang wanted every frame to be very beautiful to look at," recalls Xiao Ding. "Initially, he wanted to use HD cameras for the project. However, the limited post-production schedule, (principal photography was completed on 8th of July, and the public release was at least a week before the end of September in order to qualify to enter the Oscars), convinced Xiao to use 35mm film as the acquisition format. He's more familiar with film and feels that it is more reliable, without surprises!"

Xiao Ding used only two stocks throughout principal

photography, KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 for the studio interiors and night exteriors and KODAK VISION2 50D 5201 for day exteriors. While the cinematographer had previously used 5218 on *House of Flying Daggers*, apart from a film test for Kodak conducted in 2005, this was the first time Xiao Ding had used 5201. "The stock has excellent color reproduction and latitude, which gave Zhang exactly the look he was after. These stocks were great for matching the extensive day-for-night footage with actual night shoot", comments Xiao Ding. "Many of the palace

*"These stocks were great for matching the extensive day-for-night footage with actual night shoot."*

exterior night wide shots had to be shot day-for-night as the palace was so huge that to light it all was impossible, even

with our budget," the cinematographer quips. "These wide shots had to match the footage from actual night shoots that were part of the same sequence. The stocks matched perfectly and the result is a seamless sequence!"

Given the sheer logistics of the production, all types of lighting, from 18K HMIs to tiny 200w parlights were pressed into service. Inside the studio Xiao Ding's lighting package ranged from 24K to small 150w tungsten lights. Shot in super 35, 2.35 to 1 aspect ration, the A-Camera was the ARRIcam ST, with an ARRIcam LT as B camera and Steadicam. Two ARRI 435s were used for the high speed action sequence and Xiao Ding used his favorite lenses, Cooke S4s for the whole shoot.

Interestingly, Xiao Ding finds that working on commercials, especially car TVCs, is often more challenging than feature films "It's all cinematography though. What I love is the process of constructing the image through the lens, regardless of whether it's a 6th century Imperial Palace or a Lexus!"

Digital color timing for the film was done by Warren Lynch (*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, Moulin Rouge*). DI and post production was done at Park Road Post in New Zealand. The visual effects were the work of Centro Digital Pictures in Hong Kong and The Moving Pictures Company in the UK. ■