Born in 1950, Kevin Chu (Chu Yen-ping) is one of Taiwan’s most prolific directors. He has directed more than 100 films, the majority of them comedies. Since his directorial debut with *The Clown* (*Xiao Cho*), a 1980 sleeper hit that launched the superstar career of legendary comedian Hsu Pu-liao (1951-1985), Chu has dominated Taiwan’s box office for more than three decades, with blockbusters such as *Kung Fu Kids* (*Hao Xiao Zi*, 1985), *New Recruits* (*Da Tou Bing*, 1987), and *Messy Temple* (*Xin Wu Long Yuan*, 1994). Celebrated as Taiwan’s king of comedy, Chu’s entertaining pictures are followed by adoring Chinese-language audiences in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and, recently, mainland China. In December, 2010, his latest martial arts comedy, *Just Call Me Nobody* (*Da Xiao Jiang Hu*, 2010), became one of the year’s highest-grossing domestic features in China — yet another career achievement for Chu, who recently celebrated his 60th birthday.

**G.C.H.W.: How did you get into the film business?**

**K.C.:** My alma mater, Soochow University, is located next to the Central Motion Pictures Corp. studios. I was a night student so I usually spent my days either studying or killing time in the school library. One day, a talent scout came to the library looking for extras. Although he only offered NT$60 (US$2) per day, minus a 50 percent commission, I immediately signed up because I had lots of time to spare and I didn’t want to miss the opportunity to watch the famous “swordswoman” Hsu Feng (b. 1950) in person, who would be working on the set. Well, I ended up playing a corpse. It was torture to lie motionless on the searing hot floor, fully dressed in a sweat-soaked costume but I managed to go on like that for two long hours, just happy to witness Hsu Feng clumsily going through 47 bad takes until she finally got it right. The director (Lin Guang Zeng) was impressed with my dedication and good attitude, so he offered me a job as his script supervisor. I took the job thinking that all I had to do was to mark the slates and write down the dialogue. To sum it up, I spent my first day in the business working as an extra and the next day I became a script supervisor. Two years later, I became an assistant director. In the fifth year, I directed my first feature film.

*Prior to becoming a director, you also were an accomplished scriptwriter.*
Back in those days, I was one of the very few college-educated people working on the set. My career mentor, director Tsai Yang-ming (b. 1939), thought I had some potential and offered me an opportunity to be the writer for the crime drama biopic *Never Too Late to Repent* (*Cuo Wu De Di Yi Bu*, 1979). Essentially he narrated the entire story; I was just transcribing his thoughts. Through the process of learning how to write for the screen, I also learned a lot from him about directing. *Never Too Late to Repent* got me a best screenplay award at the Asian Pacific Film Festival.

*How did you become the director of The Clown?*

Tsai Yang-ming noticed that I always liked to joke around and had a good sense of humor. He once said to me, “Chu, you may have what it takes to become a good comedy director. Remember, the most difficult films to make are comedies. The most profitable films are also comedies.” Those words had a huge impact on my life. With his advice in mind, I wrote a comedy for my first film. The script of *The Clown* was inspired by a real story in the newspaper about an unpopular comedian at a strip joint who gives his best performance after learning about the death of his mother. Tsai enjoyed the script very much so I was given a budget of NT$5 million to make my directorial debut.

*How was Hsu Pu-liao hired for the starring role in The Clown?*

I really wanted to cast Michael Hui from Hong Kong, but his NT$4.5 million price tag was too expensive for a first film. Instead of Hui, I got Hsu, who only cost NT$10,000. Actually, I had heard of Hsu Pu-liao before and I didn’t think he was good enough to be the lead character. I reluctantly went to meet him only to see firsthand what a brilliant comedian he was. When we first met, he grabbed my hand and started kissing his own hand that was holding mine! His voice was coarse when he was speaking to me but sounded normal when he was talking with the others. He lost balance and fell off the stairs. He ran into a chair. He entertained all of us during the entire meeting. I was laughing so hard that I had tears in my eyes. That was when I told him he was hired. He tried so hard to impress me because he truly wanted to play the lead role. He said playing the lead character would be like playing himself. And it turned out to be true. He was “The Clown,” in real life as well as on screen.

*Why were you credited as the acting director in The Clown?*

The directing credit went to Ouyang Chun, which is the alias of my mentor, Tsai Yang-ming.
Since I was essentially an unknown, listing him as the director was a strategic arrangement to generate higher ticket sales.

*How did the films of Charlie Chaplin influence you and Hsu Pu-liao creatively?*

*The Clown* was heavily influenced by Chaplin. The main character in *The Clown* bears the personality of Chaplin’s Tramp. In those early days of my career, I wanted to reproduce the magic of Chaplin’s masterpieces for Taiwanese viewers. Chaplin’s films were not readily available to the mass public in Taiwan. For that reason, Hsu Pu-liao had never seen any of Chaplin’s work. Hsu actually was a fan of Japanese comedian Ken Shimura, whose television show was very popular in Taiwan, especially through videotape rentals. Many of Hsu’s facial expressions were inspired by Ken Shimura’s performances. Of course Ken Shimura may have studied Chaplin himself. Hsu Pu-liao did impersonate Charlie Chaplin a few years later in *The Four Shy Guys* (*Si Sha Hai Xiu*, Kevin Chu, 1983). Hsu and his three co-stars, Sun Yueh, Tao Ta-wei and Fang Zheng, all appeared as The Tramp in that film. Nonetheless, Hsu Pu-liao unquestionably did the most original work. Although he called me *sifu* (teacher) all the time, I have to admit that when it comes to comedy, Hsu was my *sifu*. We were a match made in heaven. He had all these skills and great ideas that he couldn’t express using words. So in private, he would continually demonstrate what he wanted to perform and shared with me his amazing stories drawn from real-life experiences. I was simply there to present him and his ideas on the big screen. The belly dance, the ping pong ball tricks, and the funeral mourner skit in *The Clown*, those were all from him. Without Hsu, *The Clown* would not have become the blockbuster success that it was.

*Can you talk more about the success of The Clown?*

*The Clown* was a surprise hit. It took Hsu Pu-liao’s career to its peak. Although he had appeared in movies before, *The Clown* made him a superstar. His paycheck soared from NT$10,000 per film to NT$600,000, then reached NT$2.5 million on his third film after *The Clown*. Do you know how much NT$ 2.5 million was worth back then? Two houses! Every film Hsu made, for fifteen days of work, he earned enough money for two new homes. But he was worth every penny. With Hsu Pu-liao as the headliner, a film costing NT$5 million would have easily made NT$70 or 80 million.

*What happened to your career immediately after The Clown?*

The dazzling brand of Kevin Chu plus Hsu Pu-liao attracted the attention of organized crime.
They saw the potential for huge profit and grabbed on to us and would not let us go. For instance, a mob boss would pre-sell a non-existing Chu-and-Hsu comedy to the theaters for NT$30 million. Then he would force us to make a film for NT$5 million. When I finished one film, the next company would be waiting for me to start another. I would only have, say, from the beginning of July to mid-August to make a movie for one company before I would have to finish another, from mid-August to the end of October, for a different investor. I was making seven to eight films per year. There was absolutely no time to write any screenplays. I was forced to finish one film after another, whether I had a story ready or not. And honestly, I can't remember any details of most of those crude movies which I made under such horrendous circumstances.

Do you remember making Who Is the Real Tycoon (Zhen Jia Da Heng) in 1980?

No, I honestly don't!

How did the gangsters treat Hsu Pu-liao?

I was too scared of them. I was a coward. I did whatever they asked me to do. And that's largely the reason why I'm still alive today. Hsu Pu-liao was a lot busier, he had movies to make during the day, and live audiences to entertain at night. Those nightly stage revues were very profitable for organized crime. Hsu wasn't a coward like me, he actually tried to resist, therefore he was injected with morphine. He didn't even know it was morphine until he became addicted. The mob successfully gained 24-hour control of him with the narcotics. In just a few years his health deteriorated rapidly. With drugs, alcohol and exhaustingly long work days, he became gravely ill. When we worked on our last collaboration The Clown and the Swan (Xiao Cho Yu Tian Er, 1985), even though he was no longer using morphine, he would still be injecting himself with painkiller shots in between takes, a couple of hundred times per day, right on the set. His body was covered with scars from those unsanitary injections. In spite of this, he was still able to perform. What a natural-born comedian he was! It was only when I yelled “cut,” that he would stop and immediately be overcome by pain. He somehow knew that his days were numbered. Many times, he tearfully asked me to take care of his baby daughter. Prior to becoming a celebrity, Hsu was nicknamed “iron ox” because he was full of stamina. But in his final days, he was frail and lifeless. Sometimes I thought it was better for him to die than to live. Death was his ultimate emancipation. Strangely, after The Clown and the Swan, I decided not to cast Hsu Pu-liao in my next film, The Young and the Old Wanderers (Lao Shao Jiang Hu, 1985). I said to him that unless he stopped the substance abuse,
I would no longer make another movie with him. He seemed unhappy when I cast Tao Ta-wei for the lead role of *The Young and the Old Wanderers* instead of him.

*Do you recall the day you learned about Hsu Pu-liao’s death?*

I was on the set of *The Young and the Old Wanderers*. My boss came and told me that there was good news and very bad news. The good news was that *The Clown and the Swan* opened to full-house crowds at preview screenings in the southern cities. The very bad news was that Hsu Pu-liao had died. I was overwhelmed by sadness. I halted production and went right to the funeral home to see him, to pray for him. I stayed there for a long while. A day after the entire island learned of Hsu’s death, *The Clown and the Swan* premiered nationwide. Tens of thousands of sad fans crowded the theaters in Taipei. When Hsu was alive, one of his dreams was to defeat Jackie Chan at the box office. That day, Chan’s *Heart of the Dragon* (*Long De Xin*, d. Sammo Hung, 1985) made less than one fourth of the ticket sales of *The Clown and the Swan*. But Hsu did not live to see it.

*Despite it being a comedy, The Clown and the Swan is filled with very sad moments.*

I believe that the best comedies are those that also make the audience cry. Mixing tears with laughter has always been what I aspired to in making comedy pictures. Good comedies have to touch one’s heart, warm one’s soul and remain in one’s memory for a long time. Otherwise the film will be forgotten the minute the moviegoer steps out of the theater. When I made *The Clown*, I was still learning how to direct. When I made *The Clown and the Swan*, I was more mature and experienced as a director. That said, I have no idea why I did the opening scenes in black and white. From the opening shot in which Hsu Pu-liao sits in solitude putting on his clown makeup, to when he is booed to tears on stage, there was no color onscreen at all. And the set was decorated with flower arrangements resembling those commonly used in funerals. Unintentionally, this opening sequence of our last film together, with him crying onstage, felt a lot like a memorial tribute to Hsu Pu-liao. Within the first three minutes, every audience member had tears in their eyes.

*Can you talk about your career after Hsu Pu-liao’s death?*

I originally thought that with Hsu Pu-liao’s death, my career was over. My success had been dependent on him up to that point. Luckily, my work starring Chang Hsiao-yen (Zhang Xiao-yan), Tao Ta-wei and Sun Yueh reaped satisfactory earnings. Next, with the triumph of *Kung Fu*
Kids (Hao Xiao Zi, 1985), I was able to cultivate a new career path, making very successful comedies with talented child actors.

Why was Chang Mei-chun (1944-1985) credited as the director of Kung Fu Kids

Chang Mei-chun was a good friend of mine. We were both developing film projects for Hsu Feng’s Tomson Film Co. Being rather superstitious, Hsu Feng once learned from a fortune teller that Chang’s project was damned, while mine would become a hit. Hearing this, Chang became angry but also worried about the fate of her project, so I proposed that I let her direct my “hit” film and I would direct her “damned” film. Because my bankable name was attached, both projects received the green light from Hsu Feng. That’s how Chang Mei-chun became the director of Kung Fu Kids. And that’s how I directed her project Oldster and Youngster (Lao Wan Tong Yu Xiao Wan Tong, 1985). Sadly, on the second day of filming Kung Fu Kids, Chang started coughing up large amounts of blood and was immediately hospitalized. In less than two weeks, she passed away from complications of liver disease. At her funeral, I laid a script of Kung Fu Kids in her coffin. She remained in the credits as the director. But she only directed the film for one day; I finished the rest of the film. It was fate after all. The fortune teller was right: Kung Fu Kids did become a hit. Oldster and Youngster flopped. And Chang did not live to see either film.

Were you still making films for the mob after The Clown and the Swan?

Yes. But I also was able to squeeze time in to make three films for Hsu Feng. I wanted to do so because she was an honorable producer. Then, my next big film, Funny Family (Wan Pi Jia Zhu, 1986), unexpectedly tanked. It lost so much money that the mob cancelled all existing projects with me. For that reason I started my own company and made a military comedy New Recruits (Da Tou Bing, 1987), which became a mega success. As my own boss, I finally had the luxury to develop several non-comedy projects that I had wanted to direct, such as Seven Foxes (Qi Pi Lang, 1987) and A Home Too Far (Yi Yu, 1990). To this day, my personal favorite remains, a war epic about the KMT troops left behind in Burma after the defeated Nationalists’ retreat to Taiwan. It was based on Bo Yang’s controversial novel The Alien Realm. I had read the book in high school and was deeply moved. When I was directing The Clown, I optioned the rights from Bo Yang. Even though the book was banned by the KMT back then, I knew it was a film I had to make in this lifetime. Ten years later, I poured all my heart into making A Home Too Far.

Why didn’t you make more films like A Home Too Far?
I did not expect *A Home Too Far* to make a profit, although it did become a huge hit. I was very disappointed that the Golden Horse Awards completely snubbed it that year. *A Home Too Far* received no nominations at all. Not even an original screenplay mention for Bo Yang, or best song for Lo Ta-yu’s classic “Orphan of Asia” (“Ya Xi Ya De Gu Er”). I am not complaining. There are so many Golden Horse winning filmmakers in Taiwan, but only very few successful mainstream popular film directors like myself. I am very lucky to still be around and remain productive after 30 years in the business. Eventually, the Golden Horse Awards did embrace my film *End of the Road* (*Gu Jun*, 1993), the sequel to *A Home Too Far*, as one of the best picture nominees in 1993. But *End of the Road* was nothing more than another profit-driven movie that I made under pressure from investors. *A Home Too Far* was a much better film. Having made it, I fulfilled a lifetime dream and do not have plans to make other films like it.

*In recent years you have successfully entered the lucrative market in mainland China. What are your plans for your next few projects? Do you have any plans to make English-language films in Hollywood?*

*Kung Fu Dunk* (*Gong Fu Guan Lan*, 2008) was the first picture I shot on location in China. Starring Taiwanese pop-idol Jay Chou, it did exceedingly well in the mainland market. But my next attempt, *Treasure Hunter* (*Ci Ling*, 2009), an action-adventure drama, tanked at the box office despite having big stars like Jay Chou and Lin Chi-ling. That’s why I went back to comedy for my third film in China, *Just Call Me Nobody*. I don’t have plans for a future project right now. It all depends on how *Just Call Me Nobody* performs at the box office. If it earns more than RMB 100 million, then I will definitely make another film there. As for an English-language film in Hollywood, no. I’m too old to adapt to a new working environment. And my English is poor. Even though I majored in English, my college years were spent mostly on the set. Nowadays, all the best filmmakers from Taiwan and Hong Kong are working in China. I’ve had top-notch, Oscar-caliber talents in my crew. There’s really no need to go to Hollywood. I am a filmmaker from Taiwan and I’d be really happy just to make some good Chinese-language films.