

30 Years of Showmanship Part VI

Here, our story takes a bizarre turn going back to 1983, when the South Korean movie director, Shin Sang-ok (known in the West as Simon Sheen) and his wife were kidnapped from Hong Kong by the dictator Kim Il Jong (a big movie fan) and taken to North Korea, where he was forced to make movies for the communist regime. While attending the Vienna Film Festival in 1986, he escaped to the West and moved to Virginia, where he lived a secretive life (always fearful of North Korean assassins) under US protection.

At the time of his escape, Shin was developing a film project about the medieval Mongol Emperor, Genghis Kahn, which he still wanted to make. With support from a Japanese investor, he was working on a deal to shoot his Genghis Kahn movie in the Soviet Union (where much of the Mongolian Empire was located). The director had also been an old acquaintance of Charlie's father, Lucas Kao, from his days as a Taiwan film distributor back in the 1970s. As such, Mr. Kao was brought onto the project as a technical advisor and to coordinate some scenes to be shot in China. John Riley, the writer of "Gandhi", was hired to write the script – but then the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and the deal fell through.

Retaining his Japanese financing, Shin Sang-ok still wanted to make a movie, but realized he would have to come up with a less extravagant project on a lower budget. He remembered an obscure Japanese movie he had seen, called "Three Kids", about three young martial artists, that he had always thought was entertaining. Mr. Kao got Charlie involved on a mission to find the old movie on videotape – which he did. Through a complicated series of events, the old "Genghis Kahn" project morphed into "Three Ninja Kids", with Shin, who was going to be the executive producer, replaced by Shunji Hirano. It would be an Americanized version of the Japanese movie, with American kids as the stars. Stay tuned to see how the project turned out and what Charlie's role ended up to be.