

A banner with a blue background and a film strip pattern. The text "Deconstructing" Film Archive is written in a stylized, orange and yellow font.

"Deconstructing" Film Archive

Planning & Administration Section

The Planning & Administration Section has two major duties: daily personnel administration and attending to matters concerning the construction of the Archive building. Currently, the Archive's Planning Office has over 10 staff and their work includes publishing books, organising exhibitions, conducting research as well as collecting, cataloguing, preserving and restoring films and other film-related materials. The 2,500-square meters Archive building, scheduled to be completed in 1999, will be equipped with an exhibition hall, a 100-seat cinema, a library-cum-research-centre and film storages. The staff of this Section have to plan for the provision of human resources as well as the internal fitting-out of the permanent building to prepare for the Archive's opening.

Acquisition Section

One of the main objectives of the Archive is to collect Hong Kong films and other film-related materials both at home and abroad. Because of this, the Acquisition Section has to be in close contact with the local film industry as well as overseas film organisations and individuals. The preservation of film as a cultural heritage is a relatively new concept in Hong Kong and the Acquisition Section has to make an effort to persuade film companies and individuals to donate their films or film-related materials to or deposit them with the Archive. In this respect, the Archive's collection effort takes on the significance of promoting the preservation of the local film culture.

Conservation Section

The major work of the Conservation Section is to conserve and restore the Archive's film collection, thereby contributing to the effort of preserving Hong Kong's film culture. Staff of the section are all professionals. One of our Assistant Curators has been trained in art artifact conservation and film conservation in England as well as in theory on moving images, production and technical management at the US George Eastman House Film School. Our Technical Officers also have more than ten years of experience in film editing, conservation and restoration. The preservation and restoration of film is a complicated and difficult task. It involves scientific management of film storages, restoration of films, sometimes using digital technology, and restoration of movie posters and film stills. The Conservation Section is now stationed at our temporary storages in Lei Yue Mun, a reliable facility for the safekeeping of the Archive's film collection. Staff of the section is looking

forward to entering a new era in film preservation with the introduction of digital technology.

Cataloguing Section

Up till now, the Archive has acquired over 25,000 pieces of film-related materials, including books, periodicals, newspaper clippings, posters, stills, photos and catalogues. The Cataloguing Section dedicates its time and energy to ensuring that all these materials are properly indexed and stored. This is an extremely complicated and painstaking task. When the Archive building is completed in 1999, it will be equipped with a reference library which will house over 3,000 Chinese and foreign language books, more than 50 local and overseas film periodicals and many other research materials such as newspaper clippings and film magazines.

Audio-visual facilities will also be provided for researchers to view the Archive's video collection. For those who are interested in knowing more about Hong Kong movies, the library's state-of-the-art computer system can help them search for the information they need.

Research Section

One major task of the Research Section is to compile data for the publication of the Hong Kong Filmography series. The publication of the *Hong Kong Filmography* series, which will cover the filmographic data of Hong Kong cinema from its early days up to the end of this century, is an extremely strenuous task and the Research Section has to comb the city for old newspapers, film magazines, programmes, catalogues or some such, hoping to find the missing links to the early Hong Kong cinema. In addition, the Research Section is responsible for scouting out exhibits and producing catalogues for the Archive's annual large-scale exhibition and assisting in organising special film shows in civic centres, presenting Hong Kong movies old and new to the general public in February and September each year. Another important area of work of the Research Section is the Archive's oral history project which involves interviewing veteran and contemporary filmmakers with a view to sketching out the history of Hong Kong cinema.

Editorial and Exhibition Section

One of the main duties of the Editorial and Exhibition Section is to publish the *Hong Kong Filmography* series. The Section is responsible for supervising the entire publication process from drafting, editing and translating the texts to designing the layout of the texts and finally to the actual printing of the book. Also, the Editorial and Exhibition Section is in charge of the publication of the Hong Kong Film Archive Newsletter. The Newsletter, which is to be issued on a quarterly basis, aims at

keeping the public up-to-date with the latest news of the Archive. In addition to its publication duties, this Section is entrusted with the task of organising the Archive's annual exhibitions and producing commemorative exhibition catalogues and souvenirs. Last April, the Section helped to present the exhibition of "50 Years of the Hong Kong Film Production and Distribution Industries (1947-1997)".



The staff in the conservation section is in the process of checking films.



Mr. Yu Mo-wan, the Co-ordinator of Research Section, is doing research on the old newspapers.

Collection Campaign

If you have the following materials:



You too can contribute to the Archive's collection effort by donating these materials to us. In the past two years, the Archive has gained the continued support of local film companies, filmmakers and the general public and our collection has been greatly enriched by their donation of rare copies of Hong Kong films and many other film-related materials. Up till now, the Archive has collected as many as 1,800 Hong Kong films and 25,000 pieces of film-related materials, including scripts, stills, posters and photos. Our effort to preserve the local film culture depends on your generous support. If you wish to join in the effort, you may contact our acquisition staff at 2739-2139. Your donations will be handled with our utmost care and will be used for research and educational purposes only.



An album of newspaper clippings donated by veteran director Chan Wan, including film advertisements and reviews of *Bunny Girl* (1967, directed by Qin Wantao).



Catalogue of the Great Wall production *An Unfaithful Woman* (1949, directed by Yue Feng), donated by veteran producer Ms. Y.C. Tang.



Script of the Asia Film Festival award-winning film *Back Door* (1960, directed by Li Hanxiang).



Still of the Zhilian production *Country Girl Goes to Town* (1965, directed by Huang Yao), donated by Mr. Wu Pang.

Film and History

On *Hong Kong Filmography...* and More

Po Fung

For someone who studies Hong Kong cinema, the Archive's *Hong Kong Filmography* is something to get excited about. As the study of the pre-war Hong Kong cinema has long been a blank, the only way to know about that period is through the memoirs of filmmakers. However, looking at the pre-war cinema through filmmakers' memoirs suffers not only from the filmmakers' often blurry memories but also from the lack of materials to supplement those memories.

I have a copy of actress Pak Yin's 1956 memoir, *Glorious Youth*. In the book, Pak talks about her entrance into the film industry and her love life but only very little about her film career is covered, with only brief mentions of the first few films she made. For her debut film, *The Magnificent Country*, even the year of release is not listed. But by looking up the film in the *Hong Kong Filmography*, I learnt that it was in fact released in 1937. Pak also remarks in the book that actor Ng Cho-fan's first wife, Wong Siu-hing, was nicknamed a "blooming rose" because she had starred in the box-office hit, *A Blooming Rose*. The *Hong Kong Filmography* not only lists *A Blooming Rose* as a 1936 release, but it also carries a still of Wong, thus turning the reading of Pak's memoir into a much more interesting experience.

Most of the listings in the *Hong Kong Filmography* include the date of release, credit list, synopsis and a film still. The information provided may be brief, but it is enough to allow the readers to contemplate on the history of Hong Kong cinema. For instance, just by glancing at the Chinese titles of *Lady or Gentleman?*, *Intrigue in the Palace*, *Three Trials of Yu Tangchun* and *The Blood-Stained Plum Blossom Fan* can the profound influence of Cantonese opera on Hong Kong films be easily seen. Similarly, the influence of Hollywood films on Hong Kong cinema can also be felt simply by looking at the stills. From Yee Chau-shui playing Charlie Chaplin to Fung Fung masquerading as Tarzan to other aspects of characterisation and costume design, the visual reference of Cantonese films to their American counterparts is more than evident. Many movie stars of the 30's such as Ng Cho-fan in *Brother*, Sun Liang-chau (Kwan Tak-hing) in *Yesterday's Song* and Ma Si-tsang in *Scent of Wild Flowers* often sported impeccably greased hair styles, very much the way American actors presented themselves on the screen. Moreover, it is well known that Sit Kok-sin's *The White Gold Dragon* is adapted from an American film. The readers can also learn from the *Hong Kong Filmography* that Hong Kong had been making films based on real-life crimes in the pre-war years, thus helping them realise that movies like *The Untold Story* do have their precedents in film history. Undoubtedly, the *Hong Kong Filmography* provides a firm foundation for the study of Hong Kong

cinema.

Perhaps because there are too many blank spaces in the history of Hong Kong cinema, new unearthed materials feel especially precious. What counts most is of course the films themselves, because seeing an old movie is the most direct means of studying a film. But the collection, restoration, safekeeping and screening of old movies also rank among some of the major tasks expected of the Archive. In addition to the films themselves, other film-related materials also need to be preserved. For an ordinary researcher, reference materials on Hong Kong cinema are seriously lacking. Many films listed in the *Hong Kong Filmography* are no longer available but just knowing the kind of films which can no longer be seen is also knowledge in itself.

Apart from collecting materials, the Archive has to "create" them too. By this I mean recording oral histories of Hong Kong cinema. The reason why I use the word "create" is that those materials exist only in the head of filmmakers and are therefore still unavailable as information. Only when the memories of these filmmakers are recorded in words can they become information. Hong Kong filmmakers are not especially keen on writing their own memoirs. Even when they do, their works tend to focus on the private lives of movie stars and gossips on the film industry. *Thirty Years of My Life* and *Earthly Paradise*, the two memoirs by director Li Hanxiang, are perfect examples. Li's writing is witty and humorous and film personalities really come to life through his descriptions. The books also contain lots of information on filmmakers and the film industry. But in being entertaining, Li's memoirs fall short in sharing his filmmaking experience as well as the artistic direction of his long and fruitful career. It is regrettable that upon finishing the memoirs, the readers cannot even come up with Li's entire directing and producing oeuvre. By contrast, *Looking Back at Thirty Years of Hong Kong Cinema*, the memoir by another pillar of Hong Kong cinema, director Chang Cheh, manages to provide the readers with plenty of valuable information on the film industry as well as the personal ideas of Chang and his contemporaries. However, works of such calibre or even those of Li's are extremely rare.

Memories of filmmakers are indeed precious first-hand information. Since most filmmakers will not write their own memoirs (or have written them but are unable to find publishers), the Archive has an urgent need to record oral histories of Hong Kong cinema, interviewing veteran filmmakers about their work and the way the film industry operated in the early years. Recording oral history is a race against time, with veteran filmmakers' memories becoming increasingly hazy and the filmmakers passing away. At present, it is already very difficult to find filmmakers from the 50's to record oral histories. In five to six years' time, it will be just as difficult to find those from the 60's.

In recording oral history, priority should be given to those behind the scene. Movie stars have always been the focus of attention of the media and anecdotes of their work and life are therefore much more available, even though many of them may seem erroneous and superficial. But accounts of those behind the scene are truly missing and materials on the work of scriptwriters, cinematographers, art directors and music directors are almost non-existent. Since these scriptwriters and cinematographers are mostly not celebrities, they are less likely to publish their own memoirs and interviewing them to obtain (and to "create") materials on the film industry thus becomes an important task of the Archive which may yield unexpected results. I once interviewed actor Lam Kau to collect information on stuntmen of Cantonese films and in passing Lam told me how the underwater scenes in *How Huang Feihong Thrice Captured Su Shulian in the Water* were shot. Although the cinematographer's method was primitive, he was able to create the desired effects. Materials provided by those behind the scene are surely valuable and information such as how foreign technology was incorporated or what kinds of equipment were used in the past can certainly help researchers gain a perspective on the difficulties filmmakers encountered and how they overcame them.

Another area worthy of pursuit is the study of the relationship between Hong Kong cinema and Cantonese opera. From stories to actors to scriptwriters (the first four chapters of the Huang Feihong series, for instance, are written by Cantonese opera songwriter Ng Yat-siu) to venues of performance, the two media are inextricably intertwined. For example, Sit Kok-sin's famous Cantonese opera, *Why Don't You Return*, which has been made into film several times, is itself adapted from a Japanese novel. This may be a well-known fact in the history of Cantonese opera, but surprisingly, it is still unknown to many film critics.

Po Fung: Film critic and columnist, who has been writing for numerous newspapers since 1991. He is also the President of the Hong Kong Film Critics Society.

History in Hong Kong Cinema

P.K. Leung

For years, Hong Kong was considered a place where people were indifferent to their own history. Many scholars think that this was the combined result of Hong Kong's political climate, social orientation and educational policy. A self-parodying scene in *Rouge* (1987) was exemplary of Hong Kong cinema's approach to history: When a reporter discovers that the woman riding the tram with him was a ghost who died decades ago, he screams in horror, "Don't haunt me! I failed O-level history."

Things have however changed drastically in the ten years since *Rouge* was released. The nostalgic trend sparked off by *Rouge*, as manifested in the restaurant trade (*Chan's Teahouse*) and the fashion trade (*Shanghai Tang*), has resulted in a re-acknowledgement of the past in popular culture. During the late transition period, the closer it was to 1997, the more interested were Hong Kong people in their own history. Many books on the history of Hong Kong have been published since, including Prof Wang Gungwu's *Hong Kong History: New Perspectives*, T K Ko's *A Pictorial of Hong Kong Now and Then*, and a variety of pictorials published by Joint Publishing, Commercial Press and Wen Wei Po. On television, a host of programs on the history of Hong Kong have also gone on the air, namely the sequel to the 1984 drama series *Miracle of the Orient*, *As Time Goes By* and *School Days* produced by RTHK, China Central Television's *Hong Kong: 100 Years*, ATV's *Hong Kong Revisited*, TVB's *Hong Kong's Epic Heritage* and *Hong Kong: The End of an Era* as well as such recent productions as ATV's *The Year of the Chameleon* and *Home Coming*, TVB's *Old Time Buddy* and *The Story of Hong Kong* and Mainland Chinese production *Lin Ze Xu*. On film, the recent months saw the release of Hong Kong director Mabel Cheung's *The Soong Sisters* which is based on real historical figures and *The Opium War* which is a big-budget epic made by a Mainland Chinese director to commemorate Hong Kong's Reunification with China. From her past indifference to history, Hong Kong seems to have entered, suddenly and almost paradoxically, into a state of enthusiasm.

This article attempts to discuss the treatment of history in Hong Kong cinema in the past ten years. It also tries to examine if the audience are encouraged to contemplate on the history of Hong Kong, bearing in mind the commercial aspect of Hong Kong cinema and the political trends of Hong Kong. (1)

I. Authenticity & Fabrications of History

In his study of the different approaches to historical films, film critic Marc Ferro maintains that the most common approach is to verify the incidents and characters depicted in the film or even to examine if the sets and props of the film really conform to the style of design of a particular period of time. Past Hong Kong directors Li Hanxiang and King Hu both demanded such a high degree of authenticity in their films. Even though historical events and figures might be dramatised in their films, they would still pay a lot of attention to the historical accuracy of the sets and props. Sometimes authenticity even becomes a criterion with which to judge the artistic value of historical films. For instance, Li Hanxiang once criticised B. Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987) for being historically inaccurate in certain details.

In view of the commercial aspect of Hong Kong cinema, authenticity is equated with high production cost and lengthy production time (as in the case of King Hu's works) which means it is much harder for filmmakers to secure financial support. Furthermore, the audience often find pure and simple historical films too boring and are less inclined to spend their money on these films. Because of that, even directors who are very meticulous in historical details have to incorporate dramatic elements into their works so as to increase the box office appeal of the films, thereby creating contradictions within their works.

II. Historical Perspectives of Nostalgic Films, Gangster Films & Nonsense Films

Putting aside pure and simple historical films, let us look at some of the films produced in Hong Kong during the past ten years which may help us get a glimpse of Hong Kong cinema's different approaches to history, bearing in mind the various limitations faced by Hong Kong cinema. Film scholar Robert Rosenstone, in his study of the interrelationship between film and history, asserts that history is not just the study of the phenomena of the past, but also the study of the connection between the past and the present, including their continuousness and discontinuousness. Film critic Stephen Heath also points out that film is not a mirror of the reality, but a medium that constructs new meanings through images.

The nostalgic trend started by *Rouge* gave rise to a swarm of popular culture products that use Hong Kong's past red light district Shek Tong Tsui as their backdrop. TVB's *Hong Kong's Epic Heritage* also makes use of footage from *Profiles of Pleasure* (1988) together with old news photos to illustrate the way of life in the past. Such an approach to history seems to betray a misconception about the virtues of nostalgic films and the role of film as the mirror of the reality rather than

a medium. Nostalgia represents a looking back at the past from the point of view of the present which involves sentimental remembrances, aesthetic distance as well as subjectifications. Once nostalgia has become a trend, it will turn history into lovable merchandise. That helps to explain why Clifton Ko and Raymond To's *I Have a Date With Spring* (1994), *The Umbrella Story* (1995) and *The Mad Phoenix* (1997) all enjoy big commercial success. *The Umbrella Story*, which opens with a RTHK-type news report to heighten the sense of reality of the film, even takes after *Forrest Gump* (1994), using state-of-the-art digital technology to merge together images of historical figures like Chiang Kai-shek and the characters in the film. However, the relationship between the story and the historical background of the film is nothing more than a patchwork of images. It lacks the complexity of *Rouge* which attempts to highlight the contrast between the past and the present and the incompatibility of the values of the past and the present.

Gangster films of the 90's, with Lawrence Ah Mon's *Lee Rock* (1991) as an exemplar, may be read as a variation of the hero films of the 80's. These films look back at the life of the common people in the 50's and 60's. A first-rate gangster film may serve as a tribute to the humanism of the past while a second-rate one may end up being an oversimplification of the history of Hong Kong, turning it merely into the struggle of Hong Kong people from rags to riches.

As for post-modernist films such as *92 Legendary La Rose Noire* (1992) and *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Father* (1993), the history dealt with in these films is the history of Hong Kong as portrayed in old Cantonese movies. These films parody the mechanisms through which film creates collective consciousness, thereby clarifying the misconception about film as the mirror of the reality rather than a medium. In spite of that, these films fail to help the audience arrive at a better understanding of the history of Hong Kong.

III. A Eulogy on History - Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* Series

Some scholars maintain that new breeds of historical films usually arise at a time when the society is in urgent need of finding its historical lineage. In reviewing Hong Kong director Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* series, putting aside the historical inaccuracies of the films, we may still deliberate over the way in which Tsui comments on the present through allegories of the past and voices his opinions on the conflict between Chinese and Western cultures. For example, in the second episode of the series, Tsui introduces fabricated anecdotes about Dr. Sun Yat-sen into the story to emphasise the importance of the historical background of the film and to put forth his ideal of incorporating the strengths of the two cultures. He even rewrites some of the events involving the White Lotus Sect with a view to criticise fanatic chauvinism. Moreover, through the happenings of a group of Chinese

children, Tsui also expresses his fervent hope for a brighter future for war-torn China.

The best example of Tsui's eulogy on history is the scene in which Wong Fei-hung looks out from Aunt Thirteen's balcony after having mistakenly entered her room. In this scene, Tsui accompanies the shot of a crowded and bustling street with a traditional Chinese ballad. As the song describes the melancholy of a man who is uncertain about the future, the camera slowly tilts up to Wong who is looking at the chaotic world below in which wild dogs are fighting for food and people are smoking opium. The lyrics hints at Wong's predicament - his reluctance to join the military and his refusal to retreat from the world - and his dilemma over his duty to his country and his love for Aunt Thirteen. In this rare moment of sentiment, Tsui uses graceful cinematic languages to express his historical view and to convey his feeling about the contemporary world.

Note:

(1) My Paper "Rethinking History in Hong Kong Cinema", published during the "1st International Conference on Chinese Cinema" held by the Hong Kong Baptist University in 1996, attempts to study the treatment of history in Hong Kong cinema using a theoretical approach.

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